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BLADE

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First the Blade

A Comedy of Growth

By
Clemence Dane

Author of
"Regiment of Women"

"First the blade, then the ear, after that the full
corn in the ear."—ST. MARK iv. 28.



London
William Heinemann

First published March 1918
New impressions August 1918, January 1919.

894637

London : William Heinemann, 1918.

N00402547-4

“ Each man to himself and each woman to herself,
the word of the past and present, and the true
word of immortality ;
No one can acquire for another—not one,
Not one can grow for another—not one.

The song is to the singer, and comes back most to him,
The teaching is to the teacher, and comes back most
to him,

.
The love is to the lover, and comes back most to him,
The gift is to the giver, and comes back most to him—
it cannot fail,

.
And no man understands any greatness or goodness
but his own, or the indication of his own.”

WALT WHITMAN.

CHAPTER I

‘ONCE upon a time’—and we pull in our deep chairs, you quietly, I with a quick impatient jerk that scrabbles up the hearth-rug and worries your tidy soul. But you yourself have forgotten the blinds! Draw them close, lest the Zeppelins catch us at our story-telling, whilst I put the carpet to rights again and pile up logs (we sawed them ourselves, didn’t we?) upon the fire. One must save the electricity these hard times. And now—you have your knitting and I the fountain-pen you gave me: it has not run out, for a wonder! pen and fat, blank scribbling book. Are you ready? The postman has gone by for the last time to-night—no letters—but the news was not so bad to-day—the Russians have taken prisoners—our front is quiet—we dare forget the war for an hour.

Think—we are beginning a book! Do you remember our breathless hour three years ago? We were overwhelmed by our own daring—such grubs as we, to dream of spreading wings, real, published, book-cover wings, black or red (you were soberly for black, of course, and I for red) with gilt lettering across them. In anticipation we enjoyed ourselves so hugely that the book itself had much ado to get written at all. But the war has ended that keen pleasure of ours, as it has ended better things. We begin soberly now-a-days—‘Once upon a time——’

Once upon a time, before the war——

You know, Adam and Eve must have reckoned that way! Can’t you hear them telling stories to Cain and little Abel?

‘Ever so long ago, when the tree of knowledge was still pink——’

‘Once upon a time, before the apples were ripe——’

Even so, Collaborator (clumsy title, but even in the *Imperial Dictionary* it has no synonym) even so—once upon a time,

before the war, there lived a hero and a heroine—and their relations.

And, you know, we got as far as that four months ago.

It's not so easy, writing a book !

Let us run over our facts.

The hero is called Justin, and the girl, Laura—Laura Valentine. I know you dislike it, but it is my turn to choose, and honestly, if you think it over, you will find that ' Laura ' is the only name for her. She is real enough already to make me sure of that. Laura—grave, graceful, ageless word, fits like a glove my Laura, our Laura, so un-modern in her ways and thoughts, for all she was born in '94. Yet the name stands, to you, for ringlets and bottle-neck shoulders, for simpers and sighs and *Harry and Lucy* ? But those were its evil days, when it was befrilled and crinolined by the same spirit that figleafs Apollo and measures the Milo Venus for a pair of stays. The name has older memories, older even than its Italian gardens and passionate poets, memories old as sunshine and song and the laurel-tree itself. Indeed, that enchanted bush, that grave tree with blood-red berries, that panting girl within stiff bark and quiet leaves, reminds me not a little of Laura, our own bewildered Laura, when Love, the crazy torch-bearer, came rioting down the Brackenhurst lanes, to break through the garden fences of her ignorance, and, entering, set the quiet house of her mind afire.

And so, unless you insist, we will keep the name: it has taught us already something about her.

What is she like—to look at ?

She is shadowy as yet, but I think you said, and I agreed, that she has soft, shining eyes—shining, not sparkling—and is wonderfully light on her feet. I think, what with the sway of her pretty figure, and her quick white hands that are the only restless things about her, she has, though she is not a little woman, a fugitive, thistledown air, that makes you want to dance with her. Yet she cannot dance: never troubled to learn. Dancing bored Justin. Her dancing days were over before she learned that it is not always wise to humour Justin.

Thus far Laura Valentine. The name grows on you, doesn't

it? That is why you are such a perfect Collaborator. I can always persuade you into agreeing with me.

But 'Justin'—less easy to conceive, eh? Yet, knowing Laura as little even as we do, he should be obvious—prose to her verse: she, the glove for his hand: the red and white halves of an apple. Laura implies Justin as day implies night, winter—summer, sunshine—rain. We should be justified in leaving them, at the end, wooed and wedded and a', in a very rainbow of happiness. And yet—I doubt.

They fit too well, complement each other too perfectly. I foresee complications. Suppose—only suppose—that, nicely adjusted as their ages are with seven years between them in the love season, there should yet be a hitch? She, as girls do, may have grown in a day, an hour, in the swiftness of a handshake, into a woman: have entered into that heritage of knowledge, and instinct that is more than knowledge, that Lilith willed her, and Helen perfected, and Rachel and Monica, Grizel and Mother Goose, have all passed on: while he? Suppose that he does not grow up at all? I only say, suppose! I have not as yet an idea of how the story develops. We are still groping for our hero—don't even know if he were short or tall.

What have you fancied, of all possible types? You must distinguish, you know, between the Justin of Laura's fantasy, Jupiter Tonans when he is not Tom-Fool, and the Justin of sheer fact, who, worthy man, has not the imagination to be either. You must not protest. He is, as Laura and his mother are fond of agreeing, a dear, an utter dear, if you like (I never know which face is the prettier to watch as they say it) but imaginative, never! Not, at least, as far as the story has run. We are discussing the middle of the book by now, have hurried on so, shall have to go back to our beginnings soon. Let us hope people will not find it confusing. Not, I repeat, dear solemn man, with one lonely spark of imagination—and little enough humour. Collaborator, he positively must not have a sense of humour or he would never collect birds' eggs. And it is essential, as you will see later, that he should collect birds' eggs—with passion. We were saying that he possibly does not grow-up at all. 'Grow' would

perhaps be the better word, for, in a sense he has been, at every age, definitely grown-up; has indeed, except for the birds' eggs, never been youthful. There are some early photographs . . . (No, there are none of Laura—she was a high-tempered child. She sat still once for love of a non-existent canary, but you did not deceive her twice.) But Justin 'took' beautifully. In all the innumerable pictures his bright squirrel of a mother never tired of showing Laura, he is exactly the same. Justin with rattle: Justin enjoying his toe: Justin with spade and pail and a seascape: Justin with blazer and bat: Justin and a smudge of moustache: Justin aggressively clean-shaven: Justin at any age from three to thirty; but never the incipient Justin, the developing Justin, never grub and chrysalis and moth, but Justin Homunculus, Justin in enlargement, never Justin in growth.

Pleasant, yellowed pictures, for all that, of a squarish face with an obstinate mouth and intent, solemn eyes. Solemnity is perhaps the first quality that would be impressed upon you if you should interview Justin. Here, you would perceive, was one who took life, revolving as it did upon the axis of Henry Justin Cloud, with becoming gravity. He was not pompous, but his slow-moving mind would be alarming because its very intentness upon such facts as it grasped rendered it unobservant, to the point of inhumanity, of anything to which its attention had not been attracted. And you would not find its attention easy to attract. Upon your honour, unless you were careful, you might find yourself at times, his creator though you were, a trifle in awe of Justin. Laura certainly was. This, you know, is curious, for, as a rule, nothing but a keen sense of humour can wake in a man's eye that comprehending twinkle that alone intimidates a woman of poise. And Justin, we know, had no sense of humour at all.

What? You protest once more that without a sense of humour he cannot be a hero? I am shocked. Who are we, to fall foul of *Henry V*, and *Mr. Rochester*, and *Garth Dalmain*? Nevertheless, if you insist——

To tell you the truth, I am rather glad that you do insist. Unless our hero and our heroine have a sense of humour there

is no chance at all of a happy ending: and in these days a happy ending, for a conscientious scribbler holding the mirror to nature, would be so manifestly untrue to life, would be so consequently inartistic, would be, in short, such a blessed relief, that one is tempted to leave a small chance, a stray peg on which to hang a wedding garment, should sir and lady, at the last, combine to send out invitations and include their chroniclers.

So Justin is to have an embryonic sense of humour; that is to say, he shall have, at least, eyes in his head, and will one day, you are sure and I hope, learn to see with them; but at the crisis of his life I fear he will be still purblind, wearing the pedantry his own spiritual myopia has induced, like smoke-coloured spectacles upon his Roman nose.

Thus far, in his turn, Henry Justin Cloud. He has stirred at last, and the girl with him, in the shadows of this half-planned tale in which we, too, wander uncertainly, ignorant of their story, guessing at their fate, knowing only, with a touch of awe, that out of nothingness they have been born and must continue, linked and struggling, to an appointed, undiscovered end.

And here, suddenly, in the vague muddle of my mind or yours, but as certainly as if he were sitting beside us, Justin lights his pipe. And the spark, flaring up like a thought, shows Laura at his elbow, shows how soft and pale and eager her face is as she looks at him—and that she has beech-red hair. And the light fades again more quickly even than it came, and leaves us still sitting over the fire, but with two new, solid facts to guide us: Laura, we have seen it with our eyes, loves Justin, and Justin loves, at least, his pipe. Which, for one evening's work, Collaborator, is not so bad!

Time for bed, I think. But to-morrow, if the news is good, and war-work done, and it is too rainy to garden, we will pull up our chairs again, and perhaps, with luck, get on with Chapter Two.

CHAPTER II

As usual, you are perfectly right. The first thing, I agree, is to decide where to begin; that is, to discover at what period Laura and Justin, who, after all, interest themselves from the days when they were as old as their tongues, and months ahead of their teeth, begin to be interesting to other people. That is a simple matter? I believe you think, oh trustful Collaborator, that you have but to drop a suggestion, like a penny in a chocolate machine, for a chapter to roll out, ready written, for your censorship! Consider the initial difficulties! Who, for instance, is to decide this question of the interesting moment? John Smith, who likes a good wholesome love story with Sweet Seventeen for heroine? Or Sweet Seventeen herself, whose Prince Charming must be fifty if a day, grey-headed, iron-mouthed, and hopelessly entangled with a repentant actress of at least three distinct, disreputable pasts? Would they be interested in the countrified Laura, not yet a schoolgirl, whom I should dearly love to draw? Of course not!

No, the protagonists must be at least in their quarter century. But what would Mrs. Cloud, on the other hand, say to that? Slur over, if not ignore, the first ten, let alone the first thirty, years of her son's life, we are, of course, at liberty to do. It is our affair! But, in that case, the book, frankly, will not be worth reading. A character such as Justin's is not so easily deciphered. Thoroughly to appreciate Justin we must begin at the beginning. We are probably not aware that he weighed, at the very beginning, ten pounds. And speaking of teeth half a page ago—do we know that there is a little white tooth, in a little white thimble-box, in Mrs. Cloud's big work-basket, that still bears witness how unflinchingly, at five and a quarter, Henry Justin could bear

pain? Mrs. Cloud showed it to Laura one expansive day, and Laura, fingering it as she listened to the anecdote that led so inevitably to another anecdote, and another, and yet another, was whimsically jealous that his mother should have had so much more of him than she. Had, as she put it away again in the big basket under the pile of socks, a cold eye for the exquisite darns: wondered that Justin had not got blisters on his heel before now. And without an attempt at consistency, sat herself meekly down at Mrs. Cloud's feet to beg a darning lesson; which Mrs. Cloud, with the discerning twinkle her son has not as yet acquired, was very ready to give. They were excellent friends, those two. They had affection, and that confident respect for each other which comes of thinking exactly alike on an extremely important subject. They would have both agreed, Collaborator, that to make our book a success, we unquestionably must begin at the beginning—the beginning, of course, of Henry Justin Cloud.

But I would rather talk about Laura.

I know the precedence is Justin's: *for Adam was first formed, then Eve*. . . . Yet Eve, bless her ingenuous, enterprising heart, is always so much more interesting than Adam. If Adam were not in the Bible, wouldn't you call him 'stodgy'? And don't you think Eve did, under her breath?

'Adam—what's that, in that tree?

'Look, Adam!

'No, not there! Can't you see where I'm pointing?

'Rather like a pear, only round.

'Adam, if you put your foot so—and swing yourself up.

'Of course the branch will bear you!

'Oh, Adam, you might!

'I don't want to eat it. I only want to know what it is.

'I do think you might!

'Don't then!'

And there the serpent's bright, unwinking eye catches hers, and the serpent, all unperceived of Adam, whispers in her ear the one adjective adequate to the situation.

And as, from that day to this, young birds have twittered as old birds sing, I shouldn't be surprised if Laura, in her

turn, has had moments—red, secret, shameful, iconoclastic moments when she, too, has rolled the word relishingly over her tongue——

“Stodgy! Stodgy! Stodgy!”

But she was always very sorry afterwards. And so, I daresay, was Eve.

Adam was never sorry. He was always perfectly happy and self-satisfied. That is why I prefer to begin, at any rate, with Eve—Laura, I mean. For a happy man or woman is necessarily dull, dull as a healthy oyster, and as safe. Few enough will care to pry open the hard shell and prod the smug, snug mollusc inside. But when, as will sometimes happen, a grain or two of sharp-edged sand sifts in, to scrape and fret and fester the soft flesh, why, then the pearls begin to come, and the oyster is worth a dive at last.

Justin, kindly born and bred, is, as far as we know, to be happy all his life, though he had those ill-used months somewhere in his twenties for which Mrs. Cloud, at least, never quite forgave Laura. But Laura's happiness cracked like a cup when she was six, and though she drank from it later, often enough, and pure nectar at that, it was always uncertainly, with a frightened eye upon the rivets with which Time, who mends most things, had put it together again.

I told you, I think, that the two were orphaned: he had lost one and she both parents: and if it were a schoolboy's misfortune to have forgotten his father (Mrs. Cloud had no opinion of Solomon: if his precepts could produce nothing better than Rehoboam, she had every intention of sparing the rod!) it was very much more definitely a small girl's tragedy that she could remember her mother.

From six o'clock in the morning, undisturbed by the erection of a tent in her bed, to six o'clock in the evening, comprehending that the gutterings from the night-light, surreptitiously kneaded in small hot hands, are more soothing and inductive to sleep than hymns, chocolates, or even *The Three Little Men in the Wood*, Laura's mother was the most wonderful and satisfactory person in the whole world.

She had tweedy, uncomplaining skirts that could get through the scratchiest holes in a hedge without tearing like

Nurse's, and blouses with blue fluttery ribbons, and petersham waistbelts that would go twice round Laura if she pulled hard, and a little straw hat like a schoolboy's. And she hardly ever wore gloves. But on Sundays she had a floppy thing with a rose in it and a great trailing feather, and a beautiful brown frock, with red silk down the front, that Laura called the robin dress. She could sing like a robin too, high and sweet, and she knew all the songs that had ever been sung, and had read all the books that had ever been written, and could tell you all about them all. She had a dear smiling face, and her hair was so long that she could sit on it, just like Rapunzel, and nobody could brush it as Laura did, because her mother, twisting a little in her chair and making funny faces, often said so. Her mother was always saying and doing funny things: she could make Laura laugh by just looking at her. Yet she was always properly serious over a dead bird or a bumped forehead, and had a most soothing way of making an armchair of lap and arm and shoulder for Laura to curl up in till she felt better.

With Nurse she was simply magnificent. She had a way of pretending that she wasn't afraid of her that made Laura gasp. She had poured a glass of rhubarb and magnesia into the slop-pail once, before Nurse's own eyes: and had said, of course Laura might have the door of the night-nursery left open if she wanted it—why not?—though she explained those shadows that dance upon the wall privately to Laura afterwards, and so satisfactorily that Laura was ready to withdraw her objection.

Yes, she was an understanding person. When they drove out in the low pony-trap through the narrow lanes that were hedged with damson trees, she never wondered that Laura should want the long yellow straws that dangled from the branches to show where a waggon-load of corn had passed. She would stand up and rake them down with her whip without more ado. She would stop half a dozen times in half an hour to let Laura jump out and pick herb-robert, or convolvulus, or ropes of briony, and give advice as to the weaving of a wreath, and wear it round her hat when it was done at whatever angle Laura preferred, with an air that

proved to Nurse and other mothers that she wore it to please herself quite as much as Laura.

And Laura, subconsciously, was aware that the mother she worshipped, worshipped with equal frankness a small daughter whom no one else found particularly attractive. And it was possibly that knowledge that allowed the mother's personality so to interknit with the daughter's, that its uprooting came near to tearing out the child's heart also.

Yet the alliance was so inevitable. There were the twins, of course, but they were obviously Nurse's property. They were fat, greedy, red-crested darlings, with mottled arms and legs, and mouths that were always half open like baby thrushes. Laura and her mother were very fond of them, though Laura's attitude was prompted, I fear, by the glory of sharing a responsibility with her mother, rather than by sisterly devotion, for she was always persuasively protestant when Mrs. Valentine suggested a visit to the nursery.

"My chick, we really *must* go and play with Wilfred and James!"

"Oh, Mother! Ten minutes more! They're quite happy. They don't really want us, you know. Oh, Mother, just another ten minutes! Because, Mother—darling, dear Mother—in the inside of the very inside of your heart, you would rather read to me, wouldn't you?"

"What? Read to a whipper-snip like you, when the poor little twins—I never *heard* of such a thing!" And Mother's knees would give way suddenly and Laura, slipping to the floor, would be tickled till she squealed. And when she had had her ten minutes, full measure, Mother would recollect herself guiltily, and hurrying upstairs, be very, very kind to Wilfred and to James. But Laura, in dutiful imitation, would yet be glancing, ever and again, from Noah's Ark and pat-ball, to watch the beloved face, and wait for a stray smile; and when it came her way, would whisper to herself in fierce, delicious exultation——

"But she's *my* mother most!"

You protest? You think such jealousy, such ecstasy, unchildlike and fantastic? And if not impossible in such a baby, at least improbable and rather distressing? And you

don't believe children are like that? I can't help it. You ought to be right, but you are not. Laura was 'like that.' An unpleasant child? If you please. But her mother never thought so. And if some premature instinct made her, young as she was, so proud and jealous of her place in her mother's heart, the instinct was, at least, a sure one. For though many are to like her, and some to love, never in all her life will she be first fiddle with any one again.

Moreover her golden age was coming to its end. Not suddenly, with a hushed house and red eyelids and the definite, numbing ritual of carriages and handkerchiefs and hothouse flowers: not in a black day that would have yawned like a gulf between Then and Now, a cleavage, definitely unbridgeable, on whose further brink Mother would move ever more mistily, shrouded in hopeless glamour; but imperceptibly, tenuously, in an ever-lengthening spider-thread of hope deferred.

For Mother had only gone away to get better! She was ill, because she had begun to wear little white shawls, although it was summer-time, and sat still so much, and did not pour away Nurse's medicines any more. So Laura saved her sugar at tea-time for her mother, to take the taste away. There was a day when Mother cried. Laura had never known till then that mothers could cry. She held her head and tried to be grown-up and comforting, but she was secretly terrified, yet a little important too, because Mother would not let any one be called, but lay quiet against Laura's shoulder, just as Laura had so often lain against hers. The next day, or week, or months, she could never remember how long it was, her lazy mother had breakfast in bed, and she was to be sent away to stay with Gran'papa Valentine. The twins were to be left behind. "Too young to understand," said Nurse significantly to the parlour-maid. Understand what? She coaxed implored, stormed, for an explanation. Why shouldn't she stay, if the twins did? She had not been naughty—she had been good, good! Mother wanted her. Mother couldn't want the twins without her. Mother always wanted her. And she wanted her mother—she wanted her mother——

She fought like a little wild cat while they dressed her, in a fit of passionate anger that shook her small body as

wind shakes a bush, and that only her mother had ever been able to control. There was a wildness about it that startled even the stolid nurse, who could not guess at the foreboding, the desperation that underlay the paroxysm, and was, of course, as incomprehensible to the child herself as his own despair to the dog who watches you pack your trunk.

It was the friendly parlour-maid who came to the rescue with her cheerful——

“Now, Miss Laura, you won’t be let say good-bye to your ma if you can’t be good!”

That quieted her, banished the unreasoning fear that had been upon her of the hateful strength of her nurse’s arms, that at any peremptory moment might seize and bear her, struggling, helpless, into the wilderness where Mother was not. She would not, could not, go without a word from her mother, or a promise or a kiss. . . . But if she might say good-bye—why, the world had righted itself again! . . . Mother would make all clear. . . . Mother would make all right. . . . Could she go to Mother now? this directly minute?

She submitted herself to the maid (she would not go near the nurse) and was re-arranged and smoothed and tidied, and left at last at the bedroom door, with a final injunction to be a good girl, and very quiet, and not stay long.

She shook off the maid’s hand, and, awed a little in spite of herself, slipped into the room.

She was so small that the foot of the big bedstead blocked her vision like a wall, and for a blank moment she thought the room empty. Then the clothes rustled faintly, and emboldened she peeped round the post. There, sure enough, lay her mother, her beautiful long plaits disordered, an arm flung out weakly.

She clambered on to the bed and cast herself upon her in an ecstasy of relief.

“Mother! Mother!”

Well, she had her half hour and was sent away comforted. Laura was to enjoy herself—and be very good—and go on with her lessons—and be kind to Wilfred and James: and there should be letters, many letters, in a round hand that Laura could read all by herself. And soon, very soon, Mother

would come and fetch her home—and so good-bye to Laura, her Laura, her own little girl——

That is how Laura went to live at Brackenhurst with Gran'-papa Valentine.

She got her letters, three of them, but no more, though that was only because there was a new postman ! But though the twins followed her in a little while in white overalls and black sashes, and the weeks went by, and Laura grew daily more excited and impatient, her mother never came to fetch her home.

•

CHAPTER III

IF they had only told her that her mother was dead !

Death, Laura understood. There had been Ben, the beloved mongrel who was poisoned, and Grandmamma, and birds, and once a kitten. Her mother had explained it all to her at the time. Remembering, she would still have had, in the shock, her mother to lean upon. And, especially to a child, death's finality is its own anodyne. But nobody, with that anxious English substitution of euphemism for tact, ever used the bald word 'death.' Mother, she was told, was alive and well and happy. She was living in heaven with Jesus and Our Father. She knew everything that Laura did, and one day, if Laura were good, she would see her again.

Conceive the effect on a homesick baby with a superfluity of imagination, and a knowledge of life that would have amused a London sparrow !

It was simplicity itself to Laura. Mother might come at any moment, and she would come, of course, from the station, along the dusty high-road that swept past the end of the lane and that you could see from the window of the inviolate spare-room. Therefore, till her aunt, in desperation, locked the door and hid the key, neither persuasion, scolding, disgrace nor docked puddings, could, on rainy days, keep a mulish Laura from curling up in the forbidden window-seat to watch the distant strip with an air of expectancy that would have made that awaited mother's heart ache.

The fine days were a more doubtful good. True, boundaries were enlarged, and from the end of the lane a wider vista was under her observation, a white river on which black, far-away specks were for ever swimming boatlike into ken, to swell and lengthen and lighten, at last, into figures of men and women—women in tweedy skirts and blue ribbons and little

straw hats, that were always Mother until they were near. What mad terrier-rushes that high-road saw, helter-skelter down the last hundred yards, and what drag-foot returns and hot tears blinked away.

But fine weather brought worse things than disappointment. It brought the long daily walks, and picnics, sometimes, when an aunt who was doing her duty by roly-poly nephews and a taciturn niece, thought it time for a treat. And then would come the scenes, delays, excuses, direct petition, and the final 'temper,' the white-hot rebellion that exhausted alike the bored nursemaid and bewildered aunt, and did indeed at first accomplish Laura's object of being left behind. For, locked in the night-nursery to consider its sins, the ha'porth of misery, perched on its high chair like a tousled bird, would be fiercely rejoicing that once more it had staved off catastrophe—a mother arriving and departing again while her little girl was out for a walk.

But such a reason could not be explained to Aunt Adela Who Smelt of Lanoline.

Laura hated Aunt Adela as she hated every one in those first interminable months in that alien household. Her all-satisfying intimacy with her mother had created in her a habit of indifference to the rest of even her own tiny world, and now, stranded among semi-strangers, she was at first so shy and so fastidious that, in the happiest circumstances, it would have taken time before she learned how to make or receive advances. But it is not easy to be polite with a hidden trouble gnawing, like a fox, at one's vitals: and Laura did not try over hard. For Laura, fighting for her memories like a dog for its bones, with a more insidious foe than honest Aunt Adela, had lost already much of her treasure, dropping one by one as she struggled the pretty ways her mother had taught her, and growing, in her bitter loneliness, into a very wild apple of a small girl, over whom aunt and household and visitors shook their heads in despair.

She became, of course, as the months went by, outwardly more amenable—was tamed as a wolf cub can be tamed, into a semblance of domesticity. There came, at least, an end to the flinging of a frantic body from side to side of its cage.

She bruised herself at last into a state of acquiescence, and even learned to do tricks. But she never forgot that she was trapped. Aunt Adela, taking Wilfred and James to her well-meaning heart, would wonder why it was so much more difficult to do her duty by Laura. Laura had been naughty at first, but under her, Adela's, wise management she was certainly settling down. Yet there was something about her that Adela found, she hardly knew why, disturbing—distressing even. Why couldn't Laura be more like other children? Why, for instance, would she not make friends with the playfellows of Adela's anxious choice? A conscientious aunt might well plume herself on the advantages she could confer—advantages that her late lamented, yet (between you and her) eccentric sister-in-law had never troubled to procure for an excessively spoiled daughter. There were the Vicar's daughters—such well-behaved children. There were the two nieces of Brackenhurst's great man, old Timothy Cloud, thrice Mayor of the neighbouring market town before he died and had a stained glass window in Brackenhurst parish church. And there was the son himself, young Justin Cloud, though he was at school of course, and older, but nominally at least an ornament of a most select little circle.

Above all there were the five little Mouldes, models of deportment, with neat pinafores, and straight fair hair, and white eyelashes, and noses moistly pink, like puppies. Laura was expected to invite or to go to tea with them at least once a week, though it soon appeared that the visits needed Aunt Adela's eye to be even superficially successful. Only Aunt Adela's eye could prevent Laura from retiring under the nearest bed with a book, and refusing to budge till it was time for herself or her visitors to depart. It enraged Laura that the accident of age should mark her down for friendship with Annabel Moulde, a sly, skinny child to whom Aunt Adela invariably referred as "A little mother. So good to all her brothers and sisters." As if Laura didn't try to be good to Wilfred and James—when Aunt Adela wasn't looking! . . . Because it was for Mother . . . because she had promised . . . not to please Aunt Adela . . . not to show off like Annabel. . . . Laura despised Annabel for her ostentatious virtue and

her meagre bookshelf—*Queechy, Ministering Children, Melbourne House, Jessica's First Prayer*. . . . She was expected to be friends with a little girl who enjoyed—yes, enjoyed—reading *Jessica's First Prayer*! Yet Annabel, unconsciously, had done her a good turn; for Laura, bursting with the humorous horror of that discovery, had been impelled to break her habit of silence to impart the joke, tentatively, to Gran'papa Valentine—and Gran'papa, over his spectacles and his *Boswell*, had been surprised into a chuckle, and a stirring of interest in a grand-daughter to whose credit he had heard little, and, conversation developing, had ended, to their mutual amazement, in bestowing upon her the freedom of his sitting-room and his biscuit tin, and certain of his unlocked bookshelves. After which there was, at least, always Gran'papa!

Gran'papa's room was the pleasantest in the house—small, square and cosy. The furniture was of some yellowish wood, glassy with polish, and there was a chequered crimson tablecloth and, summer and winter, a dancing yellow fire. The window was always open, and the fresh warmed air smelt faintly of biscuits and tobacco and old bindings. The pictures on the walls hung orderly, in couples, Landseer engravings and framed coloured casts of trout; for Gran'papa was a fisherman. He was a fiddler too, though here zeal outran discretion. His violin was wrapped away in silk and velvet, like a lady, and Laura was never quite sure that it was not, say—first cousin? to the fairy fiddle in *Grimm's*. She longed to experiment. There was the big desk with ink and seals and wax, and neat papers innumerable, and a pot with marigolds or mignonette, and always there was sunshine and the bad-tempered canary, that would dash at you from its open cage, with peckings and shrill squeaks of jealous rage, till Gran'papa whistled, when it would perch upon his finger or his skull-cap, and slowly condense from a passionate puff-ball into an elegant little gentleman in lemon yellow breeches and snuff-coloured swallow-tails, with an eye so fixed and bright that you could swear it wore a monocle.

A memory to bring a lump into a grandchild's throat, the picture of stern old Gran'papa, with his whole edifice of dignity

built up so solidly, from his square-toed boots and speckless broadcloth and his grey satin tie with its pearl pin, to his curly beard and cold blue eyes, and the unnecessary skull-cap upon his splendid white head, fantastically topped by a scolding bull-canary. A grown-up Laura, looking back, a long way back, might begin, belatedly, to miss a half-forgotten Gran'-papa, might wonder whether, after all she had sufficiently appreciated him, realize with a sigh that she had learned in those young years to love him as sincerely and coldly and faithfully as he had loved her; though 'love' was not a word that Laura could imagine Gran'papa using, any more than she could hear him saying 'pretty girl' when he meant, he emphatically meant, 'an elegant young female.' Even 'young woman' would have been a concession for Gran'papa's nice ear. Just so, Laura's phrase would have been tempered by Gran'papa to 'affection,' 'esteem,' 'respect.' And there she would have agreed with him again, for she certainly respected him profoundly. And he, secretly, respected her, because in her he could recognize his own keen, fastidious spirit. Emotionally, they were at opposite poles, but intellectually they were allies with kindred tastes and kindred minds. Not kindred souls—there they parted company; for where Laura's affection could invariably be trusted to blind her to the most obvious flaws, the testing tool of her grandfather's hypercritical taste had left him, at the end of a long life, with no object worth loving at all—save Laura. That Laura, his flesh and blood, had something of his own grey matter in her head too, was a secret delight to him: and by the time he was eighty and she eighteen, Laura had discovered that secret and how, in consequence, to wind him, for all his tetchiness, round her finger. But that is as yet eight or nine years ahead, and Laura only beginning to discover that in Gran'papa's room, at Gran'papa's lowest bookshelf, she could sometimes forget to wonder if Mother would come this afternoon.

Gran'papa's bookshelf was crammed with volumes so tall and heavy that to pull one out was breathless work, and to lift it a greater feat than lifting the coal-scuttle or Wilfred who weighed three stone. They had to be read by a literary

Laura reposing on her stomach, her legs waving airily, her elbows so chafed and reddened by the harsh carpet and her own weight, that they are to this day her worst point. Which is the reason, Collaborator, if the matter has bothered you, that Laura, even at that dinner-party we shall attend sooner or later, never wore really short sleeves.

But the books were worth it, even to the later Laura at her most feminine hour when Justin, unprompted, had admired her frock and said, not joking, that he liked red hair. (Truly—he said so !) For the books were an education, and an education is more useful than pretty elbows when one has a Justin for whom to stand tiptoe.

But to the early Laura, with her mother half lost and Justin not yet found, they were not education but Nepenthe—Nepenthe and the Fields.

There was *Herodotus*, and *The Swiss Family Robinson*, and *Gulliver's Travels* ; *Pamela*, and a first edition of *Alice* (Gran'papa approved of Tenniel) and three or four single poems, each a book to itself, with a profusion of bright-coloured illustrations—*Gilpin*, *The Elegy on a Mad Dog*, *The Three Jovial Huntsmen*, and Laura's favourite, *so She went into the Garden to get a Cabbage Leaf*. There was the *Churchman's Family Bible*, with Adam in voluminous goat-skin draperies, and Eve with hair like Mother, and square capital letters at the beginning of chapters with tiny pictures filled into them. There were the Cruikshanks—huge albums into which Gran'papa had pasted every print or drawing of his favourite artist that he had come across in fifty magpie years. And there was Mr. Punch, immortal Mr. Punch, endless volumes of him, inexhaustible, a mine of delight, and the true explanation of the singular and detailed acquaintance with Victorian politics with which Laura of the tenacious memory could, on occasion, confound an opponent. Poring over the cartoons, devouring the antiquated letter-press as only a small child can, she had bewildered Aunt Adela one day on a visit to Madame Tussaud, by her delighted recognition of group after group of Her Majesty's Ministers who had died before she was born. She adored Lord Salisbury, for instance, and pitied him deeply for losing his wife, for she had him

thoroughly entangled with *The Lord of Burleigh*. But her favourites were naughty Randolph, the mustachioed school-boy, being very rude to Mr. Gladstone, and 'Joey,' whose speeches in that last tragic tour she cut out and kept and learned by heart, and would declaim unweariedly to the looking-glass and the indifferent twins, and who was nevertheless inextricably confused in her teeming, unfocused mind with her one delirious pantomime and Mr. Alfred Jingle.

Worship was even then, I suppose, a necessity of her nature, and, her chief altar veiled, her mind was in process of becoming a pantheon, in which *Jane Eyre* and Jephthah's daughter, Mary Stuart and Napoleon (it shocked her intensely that Gran'papa could refer to him familiarly as 'Boney') shared incense with *Wamba son of Witless*, and Admiral Byng, and poor Arachne, who *did* sew better than Minerva anyhow! For Laura's gods were generally selected for their misfortunes' sake. She had the instinct for lost causes: would always be the loyalest of rebels. Indeed her early and equal passion for John Milton and Marie Corelli was occasioned by the fact that here, at least, were two who could appreciate a poor devil's good points. If Laura could have had Providence under her orders for but one busy hour, how topsy-turvily perfect the world would have rolled on again, with never a discrowned king nor a carrotless donkey nor a motherless eight-year-old in all its boundaries. Her baby sorrows had intensified her inborn sympathy with any ill-treated thing, and, as the leaves began to fall in that first lonely autumn, she would fling small, motherly arms round the shivering poplar on the lawn as she passed it, and hug it and warm it, with defiant glances at the comfortable fir trees and well-dressed laurels: would rescue dying flowers from the bonfire, and worms from the birds, and birds from the pussy-cat: and when she found a tell-tale hole and a nibbled book in Gran'papa's bookshelf she was quite as anxious as the mouse to preserve the secret. Can you see Laura, Collaborator, breathing heavily with excitement, eye and ear cocked against detection, guiltily dropping stolen cheese down that mouse's tunnel before she corked it up and turned with equally eager sympathy to the smoothing of the poor torn book, and so,

incidentally, to her reward? For in that brown, ancient book, with its long s's and its wood-cuts and its map, she found the information that neither Gran'papa nor Nurse nor Aunt Adela would give her, nothing more or less than a definite description of her mother's new home, and full directions as to how Laura was to get there.

She and the mouse had happened, in short, upon an early edition of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

CHAPTER IV

IF you had asked Laura what heaven was like, she would have answered, almost involuntarily—"A bald head," and Wilfred and James would have tumbled over each other in their anxiety to join in the chorus—"Because it is a bright and shining place where there is no parting," and to watch the effect upon you of that dazzling joke.

But after the twins came to live at Brackenhurst, Laura laid a taboo upon it. One might joke *with* Mother, but to joke about her, about anything connected with her, was sacrilege. Heaven, the twins were once and for all to understand, was not in the least like a bald head. It was in the Bible, a very beautiful place, a sort of hospital, and Mother was staying there just now to get well, and if Wilfred or James ever mentioned that riddle again, Laura would tell Jesus about it when she said her prayers, and Jesus would tell Mother, and Mother would not bring them one little bit of chocolate when she came back. (You see, she was learning already how to manage her men-folk.) The twins were impressed and obedient; yet the phrase, more illuminating than all Aunt Adela's theology, stuck in their minds, and as no child attempts to imagine an abstraction, Laura's bright and shining heaven lived on in hers as a pile of summer clouds lined with pink and silver, on which Mother lay as on a bed, with her beautiful long plaits disordered and her arm flung out weakly.

In haymaking time, when Laura was tired of cocking hay for the twins to pull down again, and the lemonade and bread-and-dripping had vanished, and the jolly sun, like Bacchus on a barrel, sat astride the midday sky, the indefatigable twins would trot away on their private business that was not unconnected with forbidden strawberry beds, and Laura, lying on her back in the uncut hay, would stare

up through the sorrel and the toddling grass, and the tall daisies, and watch the slow clouds coming up like ships over the edge of the world, and screw up her eyes till there were little white crowsfeet in the tan, to peer the better at each dazzling brightness that might be heaven itself for all she knew. Sometimes the cloud line was broken by a wisp of vapour, and then Laura tried to be sure that it was her mother's thin hand waving to her from over the edge of heaven. But she was never quite sure.

Generally the clouds—it was a summer of northerly winds—came sailing up over a slope whose crest of beeches, a mile away, flanked Green Gates and the road; so that when she discovered the Pilgrim's Progress, and a drifting cloud-heaven had become a stationary *Cælestial City*, it was behind Beech Hill that it lay, and towards Beech Hill that, suddenly grown acquiescent in the matter of walks and picnics, she would urge the nurse and the perambulator: and it was on the sky-line beyond Beech Hill that she and *Christian* did at last, one autumn day, see it shining. For though she poured over the unfamiliar print till her eyes ached, it was autumn before she had mastered the book and her instructions, and could prepare for her own private expedition.

It was *Christian's* fault: he simply wouldn't be hurried. Stumbling along beside him over the difficult words, she was out of patience twenty times a day with his credulous, open-mouthed simplicity. He was no better than Wilfred and James who always believed every word that the coachman told them, or the gardener's boy, or the chattering, black-eyed Frenchmen who came to the yard on Saturdays to sell onions. She had no patience with them or with conversational *Christian*, wasting his time and losing his way. Did he think that she, Laura, would have been taken in like that, over and over again, by *Vain Confidence* and *Flatterer* and *Mr. Worldly Wiseman*? Why, the very names were enough to put even the twins on their guard, and *Christian* was grown-up! *Byways Meadow*—there she acknowledged that she too might have strayed: she hankered after little cross-country paths herself, though Nurse and Aunt Adela always insisted on the dull, dusty, put-on-your-gloves high-road; but she would

never have pounded off to *Sinai*, or stood by the hour arguing and disputing and contradicting about unintelligible things like *Carnal Cogitations* and *The Carcase of Religion*, long before she had got to heaven and found Mother.

But though Christian would go his own gait, and skipping was unsafe because the adventures were tucked away among the arguments like strawberries in a bed of leaves, he did at last bring her past the *Enchanted Ground* (disappointingly unproductive of fairies) to the *Land of Beulah* and a clear view of the *Cælestial City* itself.

Absorbed Laura, curled-up by Gran'papa's fire on that clear October morning, reading of the *Reflexion of the sun on the City* (for the *City* was of pure gold) and dutifully looking up *Rev. xxi. 28*, had just stumbled upon a more marvellous heaven than even Bunyan drew, when the nurse-maid, as it always happened, pounced upon her and brushed her and buttoned her and gloved her and stuck a hat upon her and hurried her off for a walk, too dazed to protest, with her head full of rivers of life and fruit trees and gates that were one pearl (like Mother's ring) and strange, intoxicating, unpronounceable names—the *third, chalcedony, and the seventh, chrysolite, and the eighth, beryl*. She was far too absorbed to notice the way they went, and Wilfred and James were pelting each other with fallen leaves, and Nurse was leaning panting against the perambulator, before she realized that they had climbed the long Beech Hill Road that Nurse disliked because it was steep and lonely, but which, as the highest point of the highest village in a hilly county, did certainly satisfy Aunt Adela's belief in fresh air.

She stripped off her gloves, dreamily accepting her good-luck, and leaving the nurse to spread rugs beneath the little wooden seat, and unwrap the biscuits and the bottle of milk, she wandered off aimlessly through the sun-splashed grove, her thoughts still caught like flies in a web of make-believe, yet aware and enjoying with all her sensitive little soul the gallantry of the autumn morning.

It was a perfect day. Its colours shone through the clear air like pebbles freshened in water, and away upon the skyline the threadlike roads and midget trees were as cleanly

defined as the great trunks of the beeches themselves, that stood, brown and naked and stately, like a troop of tall savages, against the brilliant sky. Overhead the jolly wind that lived on the hill-top and never went to sleep, was hard at work as usual, scattering the clouds in every direction, like a bad dog frightening sheep, tugging and tearing at the beech boughs, and sending down the last of the leaves in golden gusts into the deep pits at the roots of the trees, that were half filled already by generations of leaves, and were as safe and soft to jump into as a feather-bed. Laura, forced into a trot and then a run, was caught up at last in a sudden scamper of twigs and dust and stray leaves, and whirled along till she felt as if she were flying. She clutched at a trail of bramble to steady herself and get her breath; but the peremptory wind would have no lagging; and, catching at her little round hat, lifted it off her head and trundled it along in front of her like a schoolboy dribbling a football, till they were clear of the trees, when it turned tail in its sudden whimsical way, leaving the hat upon the ground and Laura panting beside it.

For some slow, pleasant minutes she lay still, listening to the footsteps of the wind and her own heart-beats, with her cheek pressed close to the thymy earth, still besprinkled, late as it was, with milk-wort and rest-harrow and yellow sparks of tormentil, that glimmered like flung match-ends in fuel that was a clump of spent brown heather. The bright, thin sunshine settled lightly upon her like a gossamer scarf or a baby's breath upon your cheek before it kisses you. Through shut eyes she enjoyed the spacious peace of the hill-top, and the delicate warmth seemed a physical expression of the sensation of well-being that was stealing over her, a sensation that, in the old days, had been but another word for her mother's presence. The wind, raging again in the beech-grove, was a turbulent giant guarding the entrance to enchanted lands: its far-away fury heightened the impression of expectant silence. Through her pleasant drowsiness she had an odd feeling that something, something important, was about to happen.

Lazily she sat up and looked about her.

She had never before strayed further than their shadows' length from the beeches: the low-banked trench, where the twins played 'King of the Castle' and the sheep huddled against the rain, had fenced off adventure. But to-day she and the wind had cleared it in a flying leap and had run out to the very edge of the wide level table-land that had bounded her view, and before her lay unknown valleys and ridges, valleys and ridges, rolling away to the sky-line like waves of the sea.

And on the sky-line itself, trembling between earth and heaven as if it were a great diamond swinging on a silver chain, hung a glancing, shimmering translucency in the shape of a house—a castle—a king's pavilion—with a central arch that glistened like a high priest's breast-plate, and twin towers reflecting the sun in glints and rays and flashes of white and golden light.

For a long minute Laura sat motionless, staring—staring. Then her heart began to beat so wildly that she felt the thud of it as a sharp pain, and her cold little fingers dug and clutched at the soft turf. She could hardly breathe: she was choking, drowning in the flood of joy that swirled over her like waters set free. She sat, white and sick with ecstasy, her eyes devouring the miracle, while in her ears remembered phrases pealed like wedding bells.

The Reflexion of the Sun upon the City. . . .

. . . and the city was of pure gold, like unto pure glass. . . .

. . . a bright and shining place, where there is no parting. . . .

Her light was like unto a stone most precious, as it were a jasper stone, clear as crystal. . . .

The uncounted minutes tiptoed past.

She spoke at last, in a little whispering voice—

"I've found it," said Laura. "It's here. It was here all the time. And Mother——"

She counted the easy ridges that seemed so clear and near, traced, with a finger that quivered, the merry white road playing bo-peep in and out of the woods.

"They're the *Delectable Mountains*," said Laura. "Of course, the *Delectable Mountains* and the *Cæsterial City*. And I can get there by tea-time. If I run—if I don't stop once—oh, Mother, I can get to you by tea-time."

CHAPTER V

THOUGH its anticipation and memory can fill a lifetime, the actual emotion must inevitably measure its intensity by its brevity. Ecstasy and despair, those hill-tops of human experience, can offer, in the nature of things, no abiding place for a pilgrim's feet.

With the return of the mere capacity for thought, Laura declined rapidly from her timeless bliss into a mood of active, bustling pleasure. A thousand devices and anticipations flitted through her mind as, in feverish excitement, she mapped out the day.

She would start at once, as soon as she had satisfied Nurse by appearing for milk and biscuits. . . . She and the twins were accustomed to wander, within limits, as they pleased. . . . She would be over the hill and away by the time Nurse was repacking the perambulator, and when she was missed, who would guess where she had gone? . . . At least, she was not so sure of that. . . . It was very strange that Nurse and Aunt Adela had never said a word about heaven being so close to Brackenhurst. . . . It looked as if they were afraid of her finding out . . . as if they didn't want her to see Mother. . . . She clenched her fist. If they tried to stop her now! . . . They had better not try, that was all! But she would not give them a chance. . . . She would not let them guess that she knew anything. . . . She, too, could pretend ignorance, even if she had to tell a story over it. . . . Mother couldn't bear you to tell stories—but this was different. . . . She would explain it all to Mother, and of course Mother would understand. . . . Oh, the blessedness of being back with Mother who always understood!

She was so absorbed in her meditations that the nursemaid could approach unheard.

"Miss Laura, are you deaf? 'Ere I've been calling till I'm 'oarse. Come along, do, you naughty child, an' 'ave your biscuits. It's eleven or more—you won't eat no lunch if you leave 'em so late. Come along. What are you staring at?"

Laura's eyes were as blank as a cat's. She waved her hand airily as she scrambled to her feet.

"That over there. What's that—that shining house, Nurse?"

"Green'ouse, I expect." Nurse screwed up her eyes and followed the direction of Laura's grubby finger. "Oh, that! That's the Crystal Pallis. It stands very 'igh, you know. As 'igh as us, almost. Miss Laura, on'y look at your 'ands. Reely! A terrier'd 'ave more sense. If Miss Adela meets us——"

The Crystal Palace! As beautiful a name as any other for a *Cæstial City*. . . .

"Have you seen it before, Nurse?"

"Lord, yes—any fine day. Must 'ave a fine day, of course. I wonder I 'aven't shown it you. I come at night once with my friend to see the fireworks. My friend, 'e——"

Laura broke in. She knew all about Nurse's friend.

"Please to remember—Fifth of November?" She was puzzled.

"Not only then. Any night. Lights up all the sky—blues and reds, like joolry. Lovely. I'd like to see it close to."

"Why—may any one go there?" asked Laura casually as they walked towards the beeches. But her indifference was the quivering indifference of a well-trained dog on trust before a lump of sugar.

"Lord, yes! Mother went once."

"Your mother? Your mother too? Did she?"

"Yes. She went once. Brock's Benefit. Fine time she 'ad too. Come along, Miss Laura." She took her by her unwilling hand. "You can look at it after. It won't run away."

"Was it—— What was it like, Nurse?"

"Well—it's all glass, you know."

"Yes, I know," said Laura. "*Like pure gold*—— Many gates?"

"Oh, I dunno——"

"Twelve, should you think?"

"I dessay. It's a big place. What, Miss Laura?"

"*Twelve thousand furlongs*," Laura was murmuring. She raised her voice. "What else, Nursie?"

"Oh, there's fountains and parrots and stalls with joolry—that brooch of mine come from there—" (it was a sham moon-stone that Laura and Nurse agreed in thinking superb) "and gardens something lovely. Orange trees, my mother said, and trees with tulips on 'em."

She was thinking of magnolias, but Laura, lover of flowers, drew a deep breath, thrilling to a vision of the tallest tree on Beech Hill parti-coloured to its topmost twig with the tulips you buy in shops, long-stemmed, scarlet and purple, half a crown a dozen.

"Oh, Nurse!! And was there a river, Nurse?"

"Oh, yes—runs right through the grounds, with animals on the islands—what d'you call 'em—antiluviums—awful-looking beasts. Gave my mother the creeps, they did."

Laura nodded, but she was not impressed. She knew them. She and *Christian* had known them in the *Valley of the Shadow* and had taken no harm. Yet to assure herself she asked——

"What are they like? Is it difficult to get past them?"

"Why, Miss Laura, they're not real beasts. On'y stone. Just antiluviums. Sort of stone dragons, you know."

"Oh, I see." Laura nodded again as one enlightened. She was acquainted with the *Dragon*, too, and the *Beast*; had met them at church. . . . They were bound for a thousand years. . . . Turning into stone was a very good way of binding them. . . . She gave a great sigh of content. It was simply wonderful how everything fitted in. . . .

I beg your pardon, Collaborator? You think it curious that the conversation should have been such a satisfaction to her?

But why? Her *Cælestial City* hardly needed a nursemaid's recognition?

Oh, I see. I see what you mean. But then you are arguing

as a 'grown-up.' We grown-ups, of course, believe or disbelieve—black or white—one thing or the other—and there's an end of it. But this is a child. A child can reconcile—look back, Collaborator—implicit belief and frank scepticism in a way that, to us, is all but incomprehensible. A child will show you a fairy ring without dreaming that it can be anything but the track of elfin feet, yet will instantly and vigorously denounce as a story-teller the contemporary who claims to have seen the Little People at their dancing. Fantasy and Common Sense sit see-saw in those early years, and keep a wonderful balance; but when the lanky 'teens add their weight it is generally Common Sense that comes to earth with a thud, while poor Fantasy is jerked sky high and lost for good among the stars : which is a pity.

Do you understand now why Laura—who will always keep that balance, I believe, however old she grows—could, with only the Kent hills between her and heaven, be yet distinctly relieved that Nurse's mother had been there before her, and that children were half price? Fantasy, you see, like a fairy sixpence, had been rung upon the counter of Nurse's mother's experiences and pronounced coin of the realm.

Laura—but I wish you wouldn't interrupt, Collaborator! I lose the thread. You shall censor it all afterwards, but first let me talk myself out. And it is not polite to murmur "Impossible" pointedly to your pointed knitting needles!

But Laura, all this while, has sat meekly between the twins, eating her biscuits, a good little grubby-handed girl.

She was always good when she was left alone, as the new nurse had at last discovered; so when the biscuits had been eaten and the children dismissed to another hour's play before going home, it was with the twins that Nurse's paper-back shared her attention, rather than with Laura, slipping away so quietly that her little thin dark body and red-brown head wavering in and out of the big trunks was scarcely to be distinguished from a slim beech sapling a-sway in the wind. Nurse would have settled down to her reading with less composure if she could have seen beyond the screen of trees, have caught Laura's backward glances, half scared half triumphant, as she gained the open hill-top, and her odd

proceedings when she decided that she was out of every one's inquisitive sight.

For Laura, the careless, the untidy, the hard-on-her-clothes, swayed, I suppose, by some broken memory of kind hands pinching up her ribbons and smoothing her curls, of eyes very proud and critical of their Laura, was first and fastidiously concerned with her appearance. She rubbed her hands as clean as she could on the grass, fastened a careless button, pulled up her stockings and adjusted her suspenders. Mother hated wrinkly stockings. . . . She tightened her hair ribbon, straining her hair off her face till her eyes nearly jumped out of her head, and did her best to brush the long locks, that the wind had whipped into rats'-tails, round and round her finger into the sausages that grown-ups desire. She took off her shoes and shook out the sand and bits of leaf, and tied them in the complicated tangle that Laura believed to be a ' Louise ' knot, because it never under any circumstances came undone. Indeed, it needed scissors in the evening. Finally she took out her purse, poured the hoard into her lap and counted it breathlessly. A penny, three halfpennies, two farthings, and the threepenny bit that she had had given her to put in the plate on that fortunate Sunday when there had not, after all, been a collection. Sixpence exactly. Children were half price, so sixpence exactly could smuggle you through gates of pearl into your mother's lap.

She took a last look at the patch-work country, noted once again the lie of the road through the valley below, and then, with a little gasp like a bather taking the plunge, took to her heels and ran down the hill-side.

CHAPTER VI

How long a day can be ! An hour or less—so much less than an hour—how it can lie in one's memory like an interminable road, when pleasant years are more forgotten than towns passed in the train. How long a little time can be ! Once I saw a woman—not Laura—grow old between a question and an answer—between the opening and the shutting of a door.

Laura, at ten or twelve, would usher in a reminiscence with "When I was a little girl," and look bewildered if you laughed. "When I was young," said Laura, as innocently, at seventeen. And each time Laura would be thinking of that Age of Gold and Crystal Palaces, with Mother at the beginning, and at the end of it—Justin. And yet, less of it than of the four-hour Odyssey that closes her childhood, that cuts her memories in two and provides you with the spectacle, comical, pathetic, or merely curious, as it happens to strike you, of a proved soul waiting wearily, amid school books and pig-tails and lengthening skirts, amid vanities and ignorances and experiments, for body and brain to grow up to it.

Those four hours—joyfully down dale and up hill to another glimpse of a receding heaven, and then down dale again, not quite so springily—those four hours Laura never forgot. Each incident of the road—the stumble-stone that cut her knee : a bolting rabbit startling itself and her, and the fat thrush cracking a snail on her first milestone : a stony-faced house seen through laurels that encircled it stiffly like an Elizabethan ruff : meteoric motor-cars that frightened her into ditches, and once a nettle-bed : that black wood where, through dead leaves, her own shadow had stalked ghoulishly behind her, upon feet that were the echoes of her own : the sun-pool of a chalk-pit, trailing and tropical, like pictures in

the *Swiss Family Robinson*, with mighty garlands of old-man's-beard: a village pond with ducks and slime and dragon-flies: babies on door-steps, and shrill women: sharp-horned staring cows: dust and sunshine and the terrible tramps—each and all had been etched indelibly upon a mind that excitement had made more than ever sensitive to impressions.

She picked a bunch of flowers as she trotted along, for a mother who would appreciate them. There were fruit trees in heaven, of course, with leaves for the healing of the nations, like the eucalyptus tree, she supposed, on the vicarage front lawn; but *Rev. xxii* said nothing about flowers. "Too much pavement," thought Laura, the gardener. She supposed that even if grass tried to seed itself in the dust of the cracks the dust would be gold. . . . There couldn't be much nourishment in gold-dust. . . . Anyhow, here was one of Mother's own autumn bunches for her, pulled from the dear chalk soil—an exquisite disorder of oat-grass and hips-and-haws, late sprigs of yellow-wort between the scabious cushions, like stars on a lilac sky, with oak-apples and bleached heather and fans of scarlet bracken—all put together by the skilful, flower-loving hands she had inherited from her mother.

A bigger part than she realized of her first light-footed hour had gone in the picking of them. The end of the second saw her passing a village bakery, with a wistful eye on the stack of loaves and bars of mouldy chocolate behind the blurred, thick panes. She hesitated as, through the open door, the round, red-rimmed baker's clock told her, between hiccoughs, that it was half-past two and that she was hungry. So hungry, indeed, that for a moment her fingers closed on the purse at the bottom of her pocket. A penny, three half-pennies, two farthings and a threepenny bit . . . Sixpence . . . Gran'papa's Euclid himself couldn't make it more than sixpence. . . . No, she mustn't. . . . Yet there was such virtue in a ha'penny bun—a round, shiny, sticky, steamy, curranty ha'penny bun! She supposed it wouldn't do if she offered St. Peter fivepence halfpenny—and explained? If only St. John had the keys. . . . St. John would let her in at once, she felt sure. But St. Peter? He might, of course . . . but perhaps it was wiser not to risk it. . . . When she

got to Mother there would be tea, tea without bread-and-butter first, the kind of tea Aunt Adela never knew. . . . Mother would see to that. . . . She could wait. . . . She wasn't so awfully hungry. . . .

She turned resolutely from temptation and hurried on.

But she was no longer dancing effortlessly along like a kitten or a whirled leaf: her haste had become deliberate and would soon be painful. She was growing—infallible sign of exhaustion—conscious of her body: conscious that her back was aching; that she was thirsty as well as hungry; that, through her sand shoes, the surface of the road knubbed her wincing feet. She carried her bunch of flowers, drooping, too, by this time, across her shoulder to ease her tired arm, but they were very heavy. Such a great big bunch—but then Laura, her life long, will always undertake a little more than she can manage.

Above her the unconquered hill-road stretched as steep and long and high as Jack's Beanstalk. She climbed it wearily, bargaining herself upward—

"I will go to the second bend, up to the white birch. If I do it in a hundred steps I will stop a minute. If I do it in ninety steps I will stop two minutes."

But it was always more than a hundred steps for sand shoes, and so, honourably, though her breathless little body were rocking, she would not stop.

She reached the top at last, too hot from walking to flinch at the shock of the wind, or to notice that the sun had gone in: and found her goal again—twin towers and arched body—yet so strangely altered in an afternoon, that, as she looked, she gave a cry of dismay. It had been so near, so clear, a parrot's flight from Beech Hill, but now, withdrawn to an immense distance, it rose without a glitter from the iron rim of the world, a grey, frozen blur upon the sullen sky.

She stared fearfully.

She couldn't . . . she hadn't. . . she couldn't have made a mistake? . . . Yet what had happened? . . . What in the name of enchantment had happened to the Crystal Palace, the *Celestial City*, the bright and shining heaven? . . .

Enchantment! In a flash her scared wits seized at the

only endurable explanation. Enchantment! Of course! Of course! Oh, blessedly of course! What was she thinking of so soon to forget *Christian*, and her *Shepherds*? . . . *Beware that ye steppe*. . . . How they had rubbed it in too! And she hadn't come to a single danger yet except motor-cars and the cow with the leering eye; did she suppose she was to win through without a qualm? Foolish Laura, to forget that between *Delectable Mountains* and the *Gates of the City* lies, with all its bewilderments, *the Enchanted Ground*.

The Enchanted Ground! Her eyes sought the far hills, and once more credulity was fortified into conviction, for even as she watched, the white autumn dusk uprose noiselessly, and before it city and hills alike shrank and were gone. It was as convincing a piece of magic as could be wanted.

Laura only wished Aunt Adela could have been there to see it—Aunt Adela, who did not believe in witches—Aunt Adela, always sniffing at *Grimm's Fairy Tales!* Besides, even Aunt Adela would be—only for a moment—some sort of a companion, flesh and blood at least, at a small girl's elbow, as she stands lonesomely on a strange hill-top, buttoning the reefer that had seemed so hot and thick down in the valley, pulling down cuffs of sleeves through which the wind is tunnelling, making shivering preparation for the plunge down—down—down—into *Enchanted Ground*.

Impossible to turn back now—wasn't it? . . . What a notion? . . . Mother would be waiting. . . . Mother would know by now that she was coming. . . . One of the *Shining Ones* would be sure to have told her. . . . How excited Mother would be growing. . . . *The Enchanted Ground* stretched from sky to sky. . . . It was beginning to rain, and the wind cut through one's reefer as if it were gauze. . . . But there was Mother. . . . She could get through somehow. . . . Only she must hurry, for it must be nearly tea-time. . . . She simply had to get to heaven by tea-time. . . .

She shifted her autumn bunch, tucked her free hand between frock and skin to keep it as warm as might be, and, screwing up eyes and mouth against the drizzle that whipped her face, set off at a stumbling trot down her second hill-side in an afternoon.

CHAPTER VII

Now the same gust of rain that was disputing with Laura every inch of her downward path, buffeting her face, twisting invisible hands in her hair, and sopping her shoes till she slipped and slithered down the clay-lined runnels of the road, had already more glorious insults to its credit; for it had bespattered unconcernedly, as it sougled past him, the comfortable person as well as the immaculate bicycle of Mr. H. J. Cloud. Henry Justin, no less, who, on this particular October Saturday at half-past four of what should have been a fine afternoon, was a week short of his sixteenth birthday; discreetly placed alike in his form and his house, near enough to the heights to satisfy Mrs. Cloud and his own dignity, yet not near enough to cause him any responsible discomfort; pleased as usual with himself, and more or less tolerant of his world; cycling home from school, to spend the Sunday with his mother.

But the hoyden rain, abetted by her partner the wind, had driven dripping fingers between the collar of Henry Justin and the tanned neck of Henry Justin, with no more emotion than if it had been the neck and collar of the shivering insignificance in the reefer coat a mile or so away up the road: had trailed damply over him and across him, dulling his nickel work and tipping his hat over his eyes, and shrilling on ahead again without even paying him the compliment of waiting for his opinion of her. It was brief. He jumped off his bicycle and, with a thrust-out underlip and a glance at the threatening sky, gave the exclamation which stood with him for acquiescence, dissent, interest, indecision, or (as in this instance) annoyance, the economical exclamation that Laura, in a goaded moment, will refer to as a grunt. But she will withdraw the expression unreservedly as soon as her better self once more

supervenes. Which is typical of Laura, of the rebel temper and the Quaker conscience.

But that is to come.

We should be talking of Justin, a hundred yards ahead of us, opening a gate into a field of stubble, disposing himself comfortably beneath a convenient haystack till the rain should be over. To do him justice, Justin would have walked through it contentedly enough, rather enjoying the sluicing downpour, certainly without a thought of his clothes, which were as he liked them, old and shapeless and comfortable; but he would not ride. He was as near an old maid about his possessions as a healthy boy can be, and the idea of exposing his fine new bicycle simply did not occur to him. He had lifted it like a baby across the stones and stubble, and had the absorbed face that his mother loved as he polished its bespattered handle-bars with his handkerchief, picked a straw from its chain, and, propping it in the lee of the wind, covered it with his coat, as a premature prince might cover a sleeping beauty with still a week of her hundred years to run. Thereon, climbing to the low shelf above it, he raked together a pillow of hay, settled himself against it with another grunt—contentment this time, for the hay was soft and scented and the corner screened alike from wind and rain—and drew a small book and a large apple from his pocket. Justin never neglected either of his inner men. The apple was a pippin, and the book's author a discovery of Justin's. He recommended him to every one. I think his name was Carlyle.

He had been reading for half an hour, more and more slowly, for the haystack-drowse that is not the least of the spells of the Witch of Kent was creeping over him, when his ear was caught by a rustle that might have been a mouse in the wall of the stack, or a sparrow stealing straw, or the leaves of his own book—it had slipped from his fingers—fluttered by the air. He opened his eyes, idly surprised to find that they had been closed, but, seeing nothing but rain-laced sky and sodden field, made no objection to their shutting out that blank prospect again, when the rustle recommenced, punctuated with jumping sounds as of a small dog scrambling on to a

forbidden sofa, and finally by a voice, as small and soft and breathless a voice as he had ever heard.

"If you please," said the voice, "oh, if you please—could you tell me the way to the Crystal Palace?"

Justin sat up and stared. Facing him, on the edge of the shelf of hay, hooked to it insecurely by fingers and little digging chin, hung a small peaked countenance, wreathed in drenched elf-locks, with eyes like black diamonds set in rain-washed, wind-whipped cheeks.

Justin was too well-fed to be imaginative. And the creature after all had spoken, had asked him something in good enough English: on its bewildering head it wore the most ordinary child's sailor cap with a gilt lettering on the ribbon—H.M.S. *Indomitable*; yet, for a ridiculous instant, its fugitive, bodiless air beguiled him, and he could have believed himself agape before a changeling, a come-by-chance of wind and rain, a fairy nothing, gone with the sky's first dispelling streak of blue.

"If you please," the creature began again anxiously, and stopped. There was a sound of yielding hay, and before Justin could stretch out a hand it had disappeared with some suddenness. There was a scuffle and a bump, and Justin thought he heard a whimper. He rolled lazily to the edge of the shelf and looked over. The child—he could see now that it was a little girl—was standing below him in the crushed stubble, brushing mournfully with a handful of the treacherous hay at the mud that plastered its wisp of skirt. It had the gallantest air of assuring itself that nothing on earth should induce it to cry; though its eyes, as it lifted them to Justin again, had that shimmering brilliance that only unshed tears can give. But it returned to the charge.

"If you please——" Then, with sudden alluring solicitude, "It's only me. I'm not a tramp. Oh, I hope I didn't frighten you?"

"Well—it was a bit of a shock." Justin looked amused. "I may get over it."

"I'm so sorry. It's fearful meeting tramps, isn't it?" She had all the Kent child's horror of its bogey in her voice. "That's why I was frightened, too. I thought you were one, at first——"

Justin murmured his gratification.

She amended anxiously.

"Oh, only from far off. But even if you were, I *had* to ask the way. And when I saw the bicycle I knew you couldn't be. It's a lovely bicycle." She regarded it with wistful admiration and, insensibly, Justin thawed, like any other male child between eight and eighty, to the feminine intelligence that appreciated his hobby.

"It's not bad," he admitted, stretching out a long arm to twitch modestly at the bicycle's covering, much as a woman straightens the hat that a man's glance has told her is becoming.

"Humber, you know."

She nodded eagerly.

"They're the best, aren't they? Mother's is a Swift. She's going to have a Humber, though, when she comes back. She's going to teach me to ride, then. She promised. I began, you know, before she went away. I could jump off splendidly as long as there was grass to fall on, but I couldn't jump on. But Aunt Adela won't let me practise at all now. I wonder——" her face lit up, "Oh—do you suppose there are bicycles at the Crystal Palace?"

He looked down at her amusedly.

"Why, of course. There's a track. Races. Awful sport. You ought to get your mother to take you one day, if you're so keen."

"Oh, she will," Laura assured him happily. "She always does what I want. I'll get her to, directly after tea. Unless——" she glanced up at the heavy sky. "Oh, I oughtn't to be talking. I must get on. I shall be so dreadfully late. If you'll just tell me which road to take——" She paused. "I suppose—is it specially your haystack?" she hinted delicately.

"Why?"

"Because, if you didn't mind—if you'd help me up—it's so high——"

Justin leant over good-naturedly and held out his hands to her. She caught at them and was swung up with a crow of delight.

"You're stronger than Mother!"

He threw her gently from him on to the hay.

"Here, don't splash me all over. You're as wet as the Thames." For her dripping hair had whipped across his face.

"Horrid, sergy wet!" She sniffed at herself in delicate disgust.

"Well, and now you're up, what do you want to do?"

"There's a cross-roads further on. I saw it from Beech Hill." She tiptoed. "Yes, there! I couldn't see from the road. D'you see? Through that tree—level with the nest. Which of them ought I to take?"

"Where to?"

"Why—I told you—the *Cæstelial City*."

"The *Cæstelial*—that's in the *Pilgrim's Progress*! Is it a game?"

"A game!" She was disappointed at such futility in the big, pleasant-faced boy she was beginning to like. "As if——" Then she broke off, enlightened. "Oh, I see—you call it the Crystal Palace, too. So does Nurse. Shall I get there by tea-time, do you think?"

"To the Crystal Palace? You! My good kid! Some one's been pulling your leg. It's miles to the Crystal Palace."

"Oh, no," she assured him. "It's only the enchantment that makes it look far. It's close—it's quite close, really. I saw it myself from Beech Hill—as bright as bright——"

"Beech Hill!" He regarded the diminutive athlete incredulously. "You walked from Beech Hill to-day? By yourself? Rot!"

"Oh, yes!" But he could see that his surprise or some thought of her own disquieted her. She jerked herself to her knees from the comfort of the hay. "I think I'll be getting on now," she said, with transparent politeness and a sidelong glance at him.

Now Justin was placidly accustomed to take things as they came—rain, haystacks, or nixies interested in Humber bicycles. But as he examined her more closely, it was apparent even to his indifference that, for all her dishevelment, there must somewhere be a nursemaid in search of this particular nixie. Her shyness, rounded by courtesy, was not the mere coltish-

ness of the village child. A vague sense of responsibility mingled in his mind with a good deal of amusement

"Hi! Stop a minute!" he called. "You! H.M.S. *Indomitable*!"

"My name," she flashed at him, "is Laura."

"And mine," he countered, with a twinkle, "is Justin."

She gave him a wicked child's grin.

"Good-bye, Mr. Justin——" and whipped her legs over the side of the stack.

But Justin could be quick when he chose. His long arm shot out and caught her by her loose child's belt. She wriggled in his grip like a snared rabbit.

"Steady! You'd have walloped right into my bicycle if you'd jumped then," he reproached her.

"It wasn't that! You didn't stop me for that! You guessed! I saw you guess!" She faced him quivering, defiant.

"Oh, you *are* running away then," he chuckled. "Thought so!"

She turned on him like a leaping flame.

"You're going to stop me? Oh, and I thought you were nice. Oh, you're not going to tell? You couldn't be such a sneak!"

He flushed a little in spite of his sixteen dignified years. She was quick to see it. Her tone altered. She appeased him hurriedly.

"Oh, but truly it's all right. I promise you. Aunt Adela will be angry, of course, like Mrs. *Christian*—but Mother won't mind. Mother lives there, you see. I'm almost certain she's expecting me. They're bound to have opera glasses there, like the *Shepherds*——"

"The *Shepherds*?"

"Oh, you know!" She stamped a muddy foot impatiently. "They lent them to *Christian* and *Hopeful* to see the *City* through—from the *Hill called Clear*. But one can see better still from Beech Hill. I almost saw Mother. She's sure to be watching for me over the walls. And I'm so late. I'm so late. Oh, do tell me the way and let me get on. If you hadn't seen your mother for months and months and months——" Her mouth trembled.

"All right! All right! Keep your hair on! Nobody's going to stop you." He was surprised to find himself so concerned with her concern. "But you can't go anywhere in this rain," he told her. "You'd be drowned. You're half drowned already. It's getting worse and worse. You wait till it's over and I'll see if I can't give you a lift on my step."

"Oh, would you?" Her eyes adored him. "Oh, could you? Shouldn't I be too heavy?"

"But you'd never get to the Palace to-night, you know," he warned her. "It's five miles to the next station."

"Oh, I mustn't go by train. It wouldn't be safe. They all walk in the *Pilgrim's Progress*. Indeed, I don't know whether it's safe to sit here so long. The hay's making me awfully sleepy. You know what the *Shepherds* said, *Beware that ye sleep not—and beware——* Oh!" She pulled herself suddenly to her knees, examining him with eyes of suspicion.

"What's up?" he demanded.

"It's all right. Your face isn't black." She sank back relieved from the inspection. "I only wondered for a dreadful minute if you were the *Flatterer*." She smiled at him. "One has to be so careful," she apologized, "on *Enchanted Ground*."

He pulled at his ear.

"You seem to be up in Bunyan. I don't understand this game. Look here—why don't you squat down and tell me all about it? I won't give you away."

"Won't you?" She eyed him wistfully. Her eyes, like any dog's, said, "Can I trust you?" and his, though he did not know it, told her that she might. With that long look she probed and accepted him, never, I think, through all their tangled future to doubt him again. Exasperation she might feel, and weariness, and once a very exaltation of contempt; but never doubt—never any doubt at all that within the limitations of his nature, he was honest and kind.

And, with belief in him, the film of secretiveness that had formed over her mind, that was not natural to her, that was but a consequence of her situation, was wiped away like mist from a window-pane. She did not realize that she had

been longing for a confidant, but she did curl herself, without more ado, as close as she could wriggle to this likeable fellow-creature, and began to talk to him at a rate that would have astonished Aunt Adela. But then Justin did not interrupt her account of her own pilgrim's progress, to tell her that her stockings were muddy. And so he heard, sleepily, with his eyes on the steady slant of the rain, and most of his thoughts far enough away from Laura, all about Mother, and the twins, and Gran'papa, and the City of Gold, and what Nurse's mother had said, and what Laura would do when she got there—a long, long tale, that reached him in some shape as the Mouse's tale reached *Alice*. He was left with a vague notion that Laura was a rum little kid, also that the mother must be rather a charming person. He supposed, when the rain stopped, he should have to see the child back to her home. . . . Yet it was a bit of a shame to get her into trouble. . . . Queer, that she shouldn't be living with her mother. . . . He wondered what was behind it all. . . . And what was the mother doing at the Palace? . . . He thought that only the attendants had quarters there. . . .

He roused himself.

"Your mother lives at the Crystal Palace, did you say?" He propped himself on his elbows, nibbling a straw and frowning meditatively at Laura, who sat, hugging her knees, hunched like a witch against the wall of the stack.

"Oh, no! She's only staying there—till she gets well."

"Then where do you live?"

"Oh, I *live* with Mother. But I'm staying with Gran'papa."

"Yes, but where?"

"I told you," she reminded him reproachfully, "at Brackenhurst. Behind Beech Hill."

"Brackenhurst! I didn't know you said Brackenhurst. Why, I live at Brackenhurst," he informed her.

"Oh! Then I'll see you again." There was most flattering satisfaction in her voice.

He continued, unheeding—

"Funny I haven't run across you before now. Of course—you only came in May. And we were at the Lakes all the hols. What did you say was your grandfather's name?"

“Gran’papa. Gran’papa Valentine.”

“Not old Valentine of Green Gates? Oh, then you’re one of the new grandchildren! Of course. Oh, I know all about you now. But I thought—didn’t some one say——?” Before he realized that he must check himself he had blurted out his perplexity. “But I thought your mother was dead.” Then, horrified at himself—“that is—I mean to say—of course it can’t be the same——” and so stopped helplessly.

She made no reply: gave no sign at all that she had even heard him: only leant motionless against the wall of hay as if some heavy, invisible blow had pinned her there. And he, pitying her, swearing at himself for his inadvertence, sat uncomfortably through the silence that had fallen upon them, fidgeting with his pockets, wishing that he could think of something to say to her.

He began at last, tentatively, ingratiatingly—

“I say, Laura! I say——”

She lifted her head and looked at him, searchingly, as one looks at the last link in a chain, in a chain of circumstantial evidence that began far away with medicine and little white shawls; with black sashes and a whispering nurse, and the visit to Gran’papa Valentine. She fingered those links, one by one, recognizing, testing them, and so arrived at last at the big, worried boy sitting by her in the hay.

“Mother is dead,” she said to him, in a voice that was entirely unemotional. She was confirming his statement, not questioning it.

“Oh, you know—perhaps—I daresay I muddled names—made a mistake,” he suggested, because he could not help it. And knew well enough that he had made none.

“Buried?”

“Oh, well—surely you must understand——” He was distressed. He did not know how to phrase his answers.

“There was poor Ben——” Her voice quivered. He could not know that she was re-living a memory, stumbling once more, as she played in the long grass behind the chicken-run, upon her little old dog who had been missing for two long days. She remembered her delight, and then her sudden terror, and the gardener, coming with his big spade. Mother

had been within call. Mother had allayed that grief. Yet Laura had never quite forgotten the poor stiffened body and the tiny swarming ants.

And now Mother. . . .

She was taken with a fit of shuddering. The dry-eyed sobs that a child should not know shook her pitilessly.

Justin, wishing desperately that he had his own infallible mother at hand to whom to surrender a situation that was beyond him, did his kindly best.

"It's all right, you know," he found himself assuring her earnestly. "It's really all right. I know—I know— It's most beastly luck. But it's all right——"

He broke off. He might have been the monotonous rain for all the notice she took of him.

He began afresh—

"Laura," then, with an effort, "dear old thing—I say, you know, you must pull yourself together." He put his hand on her arm, drawing away her fingers from her face.

She yielded indifferently, letting him do as he pleased.

He had an inspiration.

"It's all right, you know, about the *Cæstelial City*. She is there, and you'll get there some day, don't you worry—only it isn't the Crystal Palace. You'll have to wait. But you'll get there some day."

She lifted heavy eyes.

"When?"

"Oh—I don't know. When you're old."

"As old as you?"

"Oh, older than that—seventy or eighty."

"Years?"

He nodded.

"It's seventy days to Christmas. That's not even one year." Her voice trailed into hopelessness.

But at least she had spoken. Justin was pleased with his resourcefulness. He tried again.

"You know, when you're grown up the days go quicker. Oh, yes—they simply whiz. Honest! You'll see."

"Shall I?" She edged a little nearer to him.

"Why, each time you go to bed you're a day nearer." He pulled out his watch. "Talking of bed—do you know it's half-past five? What's your bed-time?"

"I don't know." She leaned against him with the prompt abandonment of a child discovering its own fatigue.

"Not far off, anyway! I've got to get you home, young woman."

"Aunt Adela will be angry." But her tone was merely speculative. Laura was stone to Aunt Adela's worst punishments now.

Justin considered. The steadiness of the rain, long overdue, was prophetic. No chance of its lifting this week-end. No escape, for all his wasted hour, for Justin's bicycle. Justin's bicycle must submit to a soaking, with Justin and Laura on its back. It had, going by the road that avoided Laura's hill-tops, a seven-mile run before it, to reach even Justin's end of Brackenhurst. Justin, as he slipped off the damp haystack and resumed his sopping coat, thought that he and his bicycle would have done their duty and something over if they escorted Laura thus far. She could be sent on to Green Gates in the pony-trap, if his mother did not insist, as he shrewdly suspected she would when she heard the whole story, on keeping the child over-night, to be coddled against colds and heart-ache.

He was not wrong. Mrs. Cloud, once satisfied that no bones had been broken and that he would take a hot bath and drink a hot posset as soon as they could be prepared, was ready enough to follow him to the hall where Laura, numbed with cold and wet and the long ride on Justin's cross-bar, sat in a heap where he had left her, like a small trapped animal: and after a glance, Mrs. Cloud, all soft hair and soft eyes and soft voice, had forgotten even Justin. A groom had been despatched to Green Gates indeed; but Laura, warmed and bathed and fed, was settled for the night in a fire-lit room, in the bed that Justin had outgrown, and that his mother had not brought herself to give away.

Mrs. Cloud, as the dinner-bell rang, had a motherly good-night, with tuckings-up and the tenderest of kisses for Laura. But Laura lay passive, unresponsive, on the pillow that was

scarcely whiter than her face, staring up at Mrs. Cloud with wide, dark eyes.

"What is it, Laura?" Mrs. Cloud smiled down at her.

She murmured something beneath her breath, as a scared child will.

"What is it? Do you want anything?" Mrs. Cloud bent down, her face close to the unwinking eyes.

"I want——" In a whisper Laura made known her need.

"I want the big boy."

Mrs. Cloud shook her head.

"Not now. You must go to sleep now. You shall see Justin to-morrow."

"I want——"

"Justin's having his dinner. He's so hungry—so tired from his long ride. He had to carry you, too, you know. You don't want to call poor Justin upstairs in the middle of his dinner, do you?"

"No. Oh, no." Then, with concern — "Poor, tired Justin!"

She lay quiet.

But when Justin, on his way to his own night's rest, put his head round the door to see, on Mrs. Cloud's behalf, "if that child was all right," he found her lying as his mother had left her, still with those wide, unwinking eyes of a watchful dog fixed upon the door.

"Hullo, old thing! Awake still? Want to say good-night?"

She nodded dumbly.

He crossed the room, and stood looking down at her.

"Comfortable?"

She nodded again.

"Sleepy?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, nonsense, you must go to sleep. Look here—you be a good girl and go to sleep and to-morrow I'll give you a lesson on Mother's old bicycle. Like that?"

She said nothing. He fidgeted. He was at the end of his consolations.

"Well—good-night now." He turned to go.

Her hand shot out and caught his arm.

"Is it quite true?"

"What?"

"About Mother?"

"'Fraid so." He moved uneasily, afraid, boylike, of her tears. But she did not cry.

"Are you sure? Are *you* sure?"

He nodded.

She turned from him with a sharp movement, so that he could see no more than the outline of her cheek.

He stood beside her patiently for a time, but she did not move, and he wondered at last if drowsiness were doing for her all that he could not. With slow precaution he began to edge away his arm. Instantly her grasp tightened.

"Oh, I say—you must go to sleep, you know," he admonished her.

She turned again, lifting herself on her pillow. Her eyes devoured his face.

"Will you really teach me to-morrow?"

"Of course I will. I'll give you lessons. We'll soon have you riding all over the place."

"But you're going away."

"I come home every week."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Honest?"

"Honest. Good-night, old thing." He hesitated. Then, his pity for her conquering his school-boy code, he bent down and pecked awkwardly at her cheek.

Instantly he was drawn close, was half choked by little passionate, clinging arms.

"I'll love you. Oh, I'll love *you*!" cried Laura desperately.

CHAPTER VIII

Do you remember Topaz? Do you remember that ball of pride and red fur with the inscrutable eyes and erect tail and no heart at all as far as I was concerned?

Do you remember her slow, insolent porte, her airs of caste? How she lapped milk, delicately, dubiously, to oblige you, not herself? How she would sit in the fireside circle o' nights, her paws doubled under her, discreet, unobtrusive, yet so obviously a visitor, that she made Father, who is a family man, feel uncomfortable? How she would edge in graceful reproof from the uninvited, stroking hand? With what silent savagery she fought you if you took her on your knee?

No cat to whom I have belonged has ever treated me as Topaz did; at best—with resignation, as having a nice taste in eiderdowns on a rainy night; at worst—ignoring me as subtly as she ignored the fluttered but inaccessible canary. Yet I did my best for her, always brushed her, never washed her, obeyed barefooted, in the chilliest hours, her peremptory mew. Not that she was consciously ungrateful. I think she knew that I meant well. But she never permitted me for an instant to imagine that I understood her—I, who flatter myself that I appreciate poor pussy more than most!

And then the house next door was taken at last, by a ramshackle, elastic family with a studio, who hung out their washing in the front garden as well as the back. We did not call upon them. But Topaz did. Call? She adopted them!

She, who would not be handled, patted even, I have seen, her claws full of bark, hauled from a tree by her tail and carried limply, head downwards, under the arm of the youngest son; or rolling on her back in the gravel, ecstatically appreciative of Mrs. Next Door's thimble under her ear. She

sat about on their shoulders, their laps, wherever she could get : caught their mice, drank their skim milk, allowed them to wash her in one bath with the terrier pup. Why ? Heaven knows ! She liked them. They were her sort. Yet I am sure we were a much nicer family than the people next door.

She never quite forgot us : was even, as if in apology, a shade more friendly than before. For a long time, indeed, she paid a daily call of courtesy, sitting a dignified half-hour on what had been her chair, before retiring again to her spiritual home ; but one always felt that she did it as a matter of duty. And when the Next Doors moved on, her visits ceased. We missed her, just a little, and made half-hearted enquiries, but there it ended. The Next Doors must have taken her with them. At any rate we never set eyes on Topaz again.

All this I tell you because I am sure that what I feel about Topaz is what Aunt Adela felt about Laura and the Clouds. Laura, you see, adopted the Clouds. From the day when Justin carried her home to his mother, to the end at least of this story, she was theirs, body and soul, clinging to them, shyly, unobtrusively, yet with the delicate tenacity of a white rose-bush adopting a south wall.

Aunt Adela did not, could not, object. Aunt Adela, who lived wholeheartedly for her neighbours and their more intimate affairs, Aunt Adela, who liked to be asked to *tête-à-tête* tea, or to meet her hostess's dearest friends, had never overcome a certain aloofness that distinguished Mrs. Cloud and made her a desirable acquaintance. Aunt Adela's snobbery was harmless enough. To do her justice, money meant nothing to her, poor as she was ; but she had her weakness for what she called "the best people." And Mrs. Cloud with her gentle interest in your affairs, and her placid and implacable reserve about her own, Mrs. Cloud, with her son at college and her husband on the church wall, and a bishop burgeoning in the family tree, Mrs. Cloud belonged, Aunt Adela felt in her bones, to the very best people.

Aunt Adela, then, was flattered at Mrs. Cloud's approval of Aunt Adela's niece, put no difficulties in Laura's way, and, after a time, grew tired of questioning her as to how she

got on with Mrs. Cloud, how she employed the regularly lengthening hours she spent at the Priory. Yet, under her acquiescence, and without any special affection for Laura, she resented Laura's stubborn preference for Mrs. Cloud in exactly the fashion that I resented the defection of Topaz. Why couldn't Laura be contented at home? After all, they must be a nicer family than the Clouds—even than the Clouds!

Gran'papa, by the way, made no comment at all, shared neither Aunt Adela's voluble approval—"and Mrs. Cloud has such an Influence"—nor her secret acerbity. Possibly he was uninterested—possibly he was not left out in the cold. Laura knew her way to Gran'papa's room. And Gran'papa, between his care of his grand-daughter's grammar and his correction of her pronunciation and enunciation—he was never satisfied with either—may yet have had time to be thrilled by the news that Mrs. Cloud had sent Justin a hamper, that Laura had helped her to pack it and had dug up her own radish from her own garden to put in, because Mrs. Cloud had said that Justin simply loved—liked, Gran'papa—Justin simply liked radishes! And had Gran'papa read *The Tiger of Mysore*—Henty? It was Justin's book, only one of the covers was gone, and Mrs. Cloud had said that Justin had said she might have it. She would lend it to Gran'papa if he liked. A perfectly ripping—a most extremely interesting book.

Now why should not Laura have imparted these and kindred matters to Aunt Adela—questioning, quiveringly interested Aunt Adela? When Papa was so unsympathetic with children. . . . The twins, for instance. . . . The twins had no link with him at all beyond the weekly threepennies . . . Aunt Adela could not make it out. Or, for that matter, what dear Mrs. Cloud saw in Laura. . . .

Little enough, I should think, at first, save Justin's vouchsafed interest. Justin, who was so absorbed by things that he seldom had time for people, had not forgotten Laura, had actually enquired after the child, twice, in letters, had carried her off, dumb with delight, on his next Sunday at home, to spend the afternoon in his den. Justin had talked: Mrs.

Cloud had heard the rumble of his deep voice all the afternoon. Mrs. Cloud had a smile and a thanksgiving for her good son, tender as a girl to acknowledged pain or need.

Yet, to me, it seems nevertheless certain that Laura had, from the first, the trick of keeping him amused. From the first, too, she must have had her shepherding way with him and his belongings; for Mrs. Cloud, announcing tea, hardly recognized Justin's den — Justin's housemaid-proof den. Laura would appear to have tidied it. At any rate, however they had passed their afternoon, they came down to dripping cake and muffins at last, hungry and very well pleased with each other.

Justin told his mother that Laura was a ripping little kid.

What Laura told the Memory who still came to her in the night-time, who knows? Yet that that yearning shadow was eased, appeased, by what it heard, I do believe; because, as the months sped, its anxious visits lessened and grew rare, until, at last, it came no more to a Laura grown happy again.

Justin, of course, was seldom at home, but you can see, with his open and unusual approval working upon Mrs. Cloud's already aroused motherliness, how swift and steady would be her notice of Laura. It was in her nature to be kind, pitiful, easy. Her cheerful heart was like her cheerful house, with window-wide rooms, white and golden and domestic, filled with sunshine and flowers, with firelight and singing birds and kittens that never grew up. She had room in both for a child's voice and a child's ways, the more, perhaps, since the reserve her son shared would not, though she were lonely with Justin away, let her say easily to a stranger, "Come in—be at home!" But a child she could welcome.

Laura, on her side, had no hesitations whatever. Driven by the needs of her nature, shy Laura, timid, tentative Laura, could, like any starved sparrow, be insistent upon Mrs. Cloud's threshold, cheeping hopefully till she was accorded entry-right, her crumbs, and a corner in the warm. Once in, once accepted, she was quiet. Too quiet . . . thought Mrs. Cloud, yet a good little soul. . . . She was dazed, I dare say, in those first months, by her better fortune: was still eyeing life with meek vigilance, as a dog eyes you when you have stumbled

on its paw. Also, though she clung to Justin's mother, she had no special spontaneous affection for Mrs. Cloud, as Mrs. Cloud who was ready enough to pet her, soon realized. Grateful she was, but elusive too, cold, evading kisses, unresponsive when you took her on your knee, limply angular against a motherly breast. It was not Mrs. Cloud who had picked her up out of a haystack—out of a hell. . . .

But, received discreetly as one representing a federate state, allowed to hunch by the hour (but on an individual footstool) at Mrs. Cloud's feet, hugging her own knees, elaborating her own views of life and enquiring with luring, alluring interest into those of her hostess, Laura could be singularly companionable in an elderly and impersonal fashion that made Justin laugh and chaff them both when he caught them at their gossiping, but which had the undoubted effect of making Mrs. Cloud confidential.

'Confidential' is a strange word to link with Mrs. Cloud, who did not, originally because she would not (but 'would' had long ago hardened into 'could') expand or respond to any one save Justin: and how often, how intimately even to him, had she spoken of what lay closest to her heart? closer, more desperately dear than Justin, even than Justin; for women will always wonder how far the God-appointed seed consoles for Abel dead and Cain a fugitive. What should Justin know, beyond their names, of the two little girls who died, and of the first-born, John, the legendary brother, so like and so unlike himself, John Cloud the ne'er-do-weel, swallowed up years since by the continent that gives new lamps for old?

But watch Mrs. Cloud's face (or, if you love her a little, do not watch) when Brackenhurst stirs its tea, and doubles up its thin bread-and-butter, and talks, with its air of bewildered but unshakable patronage, of America.

The grocer, bankrupt since Brackenhurst's invasion by the smart, blue-painted Co-operative Stores (margarine given in with every pound of butter) poor Pringleon the grocer is doing very well out there. Has built a house and sent home for Mrs. Pringleon.

"Ah, well—one knows how they want men!" says

Brackenhurst sagely. "Actually pay emigrants to come. Or is that New Zealand? And that girl from the 'Plough'!" Brackenhurst coughs. "Yes, doing splendidly! Ah, well, they want servants so out there, you see! An absolute famine! Put up with anything—anything! Extraordinary! No caps! Bicycles provided! Evenings out! And wages! Incredible!"

Brackenhurst, with an eye on its own dragooned and aproned treasure, hesitates between envy of a land that can afford such wages and concede such privileges, and a preference for its own England of modest incomes and attendant uniforms. And volunteers news of a nephew's friend who was in the rush of 'ninety-six, an eulogy of Ella Wheeler Wilcox and a recipe for American rarebit, and so to Mrs. Beeton and home waters again.

But we watch the two bright spots of colour fade again in Mrs. Cloud's cheeks, and her hand relax that held so tightly the arm of the chair, while with the other she lifts her tea-cup and drinks, a little thirstily, and are glad that Brackenhurst is less observant than you or I should be, of its dear Mrs. Cloud.

And yet, incredible as it may seem, it was not long before Laura knew all about John, and Lettice, and little Mary-Rosalind. The big fat family albums, with their stamped, stuffed, leathern covers and biblical clasps, were not to be kept from Laura, reverent yet intrigued: and once fairly open on Mrs. Cloud's lap at a little girl in pantalettes and an urchin that Laura at first glance had mistaken for Justin, there would be stories.

Laura would ground-bait artfully.

"Was Justin ever naughty when he was little, Mrs. Cloud?"

Mrs. Cloud would affect forgetfulness.

"Oh, not more than other children, I suppose. Aren't your little brothers ever naughty?"

Laura would consider.

"Oh, yes. Silly naughty. But not exciting. Not like Justin when he threw the porridge at Miss Beamish." Her eyes gleamed admiration. "And that day, you know, at the photographer's—when he was so cross. The picture's here."

"That was John," said Mrs. Cloud quickly.

"Oh ? ?" Laura could put a good deal into her exclamations. "Oh ? ? ?"

The knitting needles would slacken for long minutes, till at last, with a click and a gleam, caught from the fire or from Mrs. Cloud's eyes, hands and voice would pick up the thread.

"I'm afraid he was a bad boy, too. I remember——"

Then Laura would give a sigh of achievement and settle down to listen.

But besides the stories, the interminable stories that a child loves, of other little boys and girls, there was endless amusement in the grown-ups, the drooping ladies and Mr. Mantalini gentlemen, the family groups with the pig-tailed children, the crinolines and the bustles, the whiskers and the ringlets, and the pork-pie hats of all the aunts and uncles and cousins and grandfathers and great-grandmothers of Justin. It was very interesting: and she learned to refer to them with an air of intimate recollection that staggered Justin one day, when, sprawling by the fire with a college friend and *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, he told a story, quite a good story, of an *émigré* who had married a great-aunt or other of his own.

A voice from the window-seat at once reproached him.

"Not *your* great-aunt, Justin, your *mother's* great-aunt, and it was her great-aunt Jane Eleanor, not her great-aunt Emily."

Justin jumped.

Laura—as usual she was lying flat, her chin in her fists, her heels in the air—turned a page. She was no longer concerned. She had done her duty, and the *Arabian Nights* was more than absorbing.

"Oh, it was, was it ?" said Justin. And then, recovering, "Shut up, Laura. It's not your Aunt Emily !"

She lifted eyes clouded with her story.

"Eleanor—not Emily," she corrected patiently. "Great-aunt Emily married Great-uncle Michael, and it's their little boy you were so like when you were little. All except the nose."

The friend chuckled.

"Where did you get all this from?" demanded Justin, overborne by the evidence.

"I don't know—your mother told me," said Laura vaguely. Then, without a change of tone—"Justin, would *you* have married *Haiatalnefous*, as well as the *Princess of China* if you'd been *Camaralzaman*?"

"Certainly not," said Justin virtuously, and the friend went off into a sudden fit of laughter.

"Because I don't think it was fair," said Laura with intense conviction.

CHAPTER IX

AT half-past ten years old, Laura went to school and then came home again, with the simple directness of the King of France.

It was her own fault, as she candidly admitted to herself—her own, Justin's a little, still more Mr. Kipling's, but mainly and responsibly, her own. You observe that she did not blame Aunt Adela at all. She was always a just child.

And yet, of course, it was Aunt Adela who had been anxious for at least a year that Laura should go to school, who had said so, plaintively, once to Papa, who did not commit himself, and incessantly to Brackenhurst; for boarding schools had a Refining Influence . . . and Companionship, you know . . . and she had a bosom friend, a Miss Massingberd, such an Intellectual woman, who had recently opened a school and needed pupils. . . .

Upon the horns of that altar Aunt Adela intended that Laura, entirely for her own good, should be offered up; for Aunt Adela was indefatigably benevolent at second hand. She used to make opportunity for little chats with Laura, and paint flamboyant pictures of the delights that awaited her if she would only tell Gran'papa that she should like to go to school. (Already the household was finding Laura a convenient mediator.) Laura listened politely, with her head on one side, like a wary robin. But she, too, did not commit herself.

One unlucky morning, however, fate overtook her.

She was engaged at the time in the particularly fascinating occupation of tidying Mrs. Cloud's wardrobe drawers. If I were Laura, I could write a poem on Mrs. Cloud's wardrobe, big as a little house, brown and grained and polished like

a horse-chestnut or a ha'penny bun, with its clinking handles and the long looking-glass door, which, as it swung open, reflected in the mantel-glass opposite your own side face, unfamiliar, gratifying. It had dark shelves that ran up like ladder-rungs to the ceiling—but they pulled out disconcertingly if you tried to climb—and great drawers in which you could easily have hidden Prince Charlie (lying flat with blouses over him) what time the Butcher and his Southrons clanked up the stairs. Oh, the long shelves and the deep drawers it had, all vaguely sweet with orris-root and lemon-weed, and the piles of smooth linen (Laura's night-dresses were flannel, a hygienic brown) and the tiny scented bags that dropped from them, tied up with rainbow ribbons! And there were boxes—Japanese boxes—each with its special smell of lace or leather, and its name upon its lid in golden handwriting; and a little wicker basket where the dead gloves went, that Laura might take for finger-stalls or gardening; and shawls for dressing-up, and a feather fan, and a scarf from India all sewn over with silver and as heavy as a tennis net, for playing mermaids. There was a piece-drawer like *Mrs. S. F. Robinson's* enchanted bag; and a carved comb six inches high and once, in a corner, candles and glass balls from last year's Christmas tree; and little trinket cases that Laura was allowed to open, and the great jewel box with the baize petticoat that was always locked because it had diamonds inside it, and Justin's watch, and more rings than would go on all Laura's fingers, counting thumbs.

The sea hath its pearls, and argosies unload in London Town; but have you ever tidied Mrs. Cloud's wardrobe?

Tidying (she called it tidying!) this delectable wardrobe that day, what should Laura come upon but a fat bundle which, deposited with the dumb eloquence of a retriever on Mrs. Cloud's lap, was deprived of its elastic band and displayed to her as a sheaf of reports—Justin's reports at his preparatory school. She was allowed to go through them, and because she could not help wheedling explanations out of a particularly busy Mrs. Cloud, to read to herself a few, a very few, of Justin's letters home. Here was literature indeed! There was Shakespeare, no doubt: there was the *B. O. P.*: there was

Louisa Alcott and Sir Thomas Malory; but what were such scribblers then to Laura reading Justin's letters home?

To top that revelation came *Stalky and Co.* for a birthday present.

Naturally she dreamed of going to school herself. In that mood Aunt Adela surprised her, and, striking while the iron was hot, settled matters with her, with her own friend, and with Papa, who wrote, in grim silence, the necessary cheques. He had never approved of boarding schools for his women-folk.

Neither did Laura. The door of the prim drawing-room had not closed behind Aunt Adela, she had barely rubbed Aunt Adela's farewells from her cheeks, before she had realized that she had been trapped again, that she hadn't intended to go to school, that she would never meet *Beelle* at 'The Laburnums,' and that she was stuck there for a term at least, because, when there is a chance that they may be read by Mrs. Cloud who would tell Justin, one does not fill one's letters home with supplications and lamentings. Justin never once said that he wanted to come back! . . . Finally, she was going to be horribly homesick. . . .

She was. She was put into the lowest class and she hated everyone. Exile, of the body or of the mind, always roused, and always will rouse in her, I think, a bitter, ardent devil, that, when she was a child, was completely beyond her comprehension or control. She, who was all for peace and pleasantry and quiet life, found herself involved in wars and rumours of wars, in quarrels and injustice and defiances, that stamped themselves heavily, like a blind pattern, upon a solid background of nostalgia, so that she spent her days, like any cat, fighting and dreaming.

She endured for a full term: packed, in spite of protests, all her property at the end of it: bade a polite and final farewell to a bewildered head-mistress, and then came home again. Once there, she refused to budge.

She needed a whipping, of course. Brackenhurst, deeply interested, urged it upon Aunt Adela. But somehow it was difficult to inflict upon the soft-eyed, mouse-like creature that was Laura—until you roused her. And Laura never let Aunt Adela rouse her now-a-days, was a good little girl and

an obedient, with her Aunt Adela. As Adela admitted to Brackenhurst, she was, in daily life, docile enough. Aunt Adela, who could not understand her contradictions, never realized that you might prune as you pleased—if you left her roots alone.

But Laura had it out with a grimly smiling grandfather, who did not appear surprised. He heard what she had to say, discussed the matter with her as he never did with Adela, and, to everyone's horror, let her have her way. Possibly Laura's challenge to her aunt—"Why can't Gran'papa teach me? He knows tons more than Miss Massingberd"—tickled him.

At any rate Laura stayed at home, and her education, as it achieved itself between the two of them, with occasional help from Justin, was, if irregular, at least essentially satisfying. She was, of course, if you contrast her provision with the full fare of the schools, fed and clad but scantily; but her scraps fell at least from ambrosial tables and her rags were cloth-of-golden. And she throve. That is certain.

Aunt Adela's next move, naturally, was to demand a governess. But even her assiduity had not been able to discover any one whom Gran'papa could endure for more than a month. A week was usually enough for them both. With visitors, half-hour visitors, he found it hard enough to be uncritical; but to have a stranger, and a feminine stranger at that, with an inevitable mannerism to jar his fidgety niceness, definitely established in his household, drove him into a fever of nervous irritation. His patient daughter did her best, but it required more nerve than she possessed to say, however sweetly, to an efficient young woman with certificates and a silk petticoat: "Oh, by the way, Miss—er—, you *don't* blow your nose at meals, do you?" and after the rout of Miss Runciman with her nervous little giggle, of Miss Sandys who would talk to Papa while he was eating, and of Miss Jenkins who used slang and dropped her g's, Aunt Adela decided that an English girl without an affectation was beyond discovery, and that Papa must look after Laura's education by himself. Can you hear her *sotto-voce* indignation? Can you see her washing her long, twitching hands of the whole affair? There is no

doubt but that Papa was exceedingly trying. All Bracken-hurst knew it and pitied the poor lady. But neither Bracken-hurst nor she herself ever had the moral courage to tell him so.

Laura, however, was none the worse off. She could read and write, had the run of two houses in the matter of books, and Justin—never again so divinely discerning—Justin had given her a paint-box. Thus equipped, she was left to potter at her own pace along the road to knowledge of those inner and outer worlds in which, for the next fifty years or so, she was to stage her eternal comedy of existence.

And she enjoyed herself. At ten—twelve—fourteen—she enjoyed herself, æsthetically at least, as keenly and painfully as at any later period, blissfully absorbed in words and colours and sounds, in discovering that the sky is awfully blue and the earth so green, so green; but that if she said big words to herself from Gran'papa's dictionary, 'azure' 'translucent,' 'emerald,' 'lapis-lazuli,' sky and earth would deepen and glow till she was dazzled, and that, although she could not get what she saw on to paper, juicy as Winsor and Newtons were, at least she could always try. And there the sable paint-brush was certainly a help, though expensive!

And though in these, as in all her adventures, she was unescorted, she was not lonely. She was always aware that there were guiding hands to right and left of her if she chose to stretch out her own. Hands, indeed, that were inclined to tug in opposite directions, and so, perhaps, held her the steadier between extreme and extreme; for an intelligent young man convinced that he understands everything, and a wise old one, still more sure that he knows nothing, are no bad teachers for an imaginative child, who worships the one and honours the other.

Justin, because she saw less of him; because he was young; because he made her laugh; because he forgot her for months and then remembered her again; because he let her play in his room and learn her geography from his stamp album, and put her in charge, in his absence, of his innumerable collections; because he had white teeth and delightful crinkles at the corners of his eyes when he put back his head and laughed

at her; because, in short, he was God—Justin, naturally, influenced her development more than old Mr. Valentine, though he, in his cold way, was less unconscious of responsibility than Aunt Adela would have you believe. Yet the amazing, amusing contrast in the two men's attitudes to life and Books (the choice of capital is Laura's) developed in her, all unconsciously, a sense of humour, which is a sense of proportion, that never withered, though she is to starve it ruthlessly in the years that are labelled discreet.

When, for instance, Gran'papa's grudging and suspicious recognition of those hot-bloods Mr. Tennyson and Mr. Dickens, was compared in her alert mind with Justin's yawning admission that he really must wade through 'em all some day, she would give a little gurgle of laughter all to herself, though she did not really know why. But she was sure her mother would have laughed too in that half-forgotten fascinating way of hers and have made the funniness obvious to Laura. Laura was sure of that. Even *Sam Weller* was not quite so funny when you met him by yourself—but when Mother had read it aloud—oh, did the twins remember? But the twins never remembered anything. Never remembered, never cared for anything but trains, and rigging up telephones in the cherry trees, and catapulting robins, never wanted Laura except at night when there were stories to be told, or when they quarrelled with each other in the day-time. And certainly never noticed much difference between the edition of *Alice* that Gran'papa produced from a corner of his bookshelf one birthday and the parcel from Justin by the post, with the same familiar letterpress and most unfamiliar drawings by a certain sacrilegious Mr. Rackham. There again, Gran'papa's indignation, though she agreed with him, struck her as humorous. In short, she was beginning, what with one mentor and the other, to form a judgment of her own, not to mention a morality. The fundamental 'shalt nots,' built up secretly, like coral rocks, in her childish deeps, were, in the lull that precedes the teens, beginning to show starkly above water.

"Never, never cry."

"It's nice to be in the right, but it makes them squash you."

"Never argue with Gran'papa."

"Never remind Justin of what he said last holidays.

"Never say you're tired."

In matters of art, too, though she enjoyed trying to look through both ends of her human opera-glasses at once, she had got into a habit (in self-defence, as it were) of using her own eyes in daily life. Glasses were a revelation, of course, either end of them. Justin's display of remote, romantic figures with curvy throats who really lived, in London, and waved Yellow Books (a horrid colour) and sniffed at Gran'papa's Michael Angelo because he had a broken nose and couldn't sniff back, was as exciting as it was bewildering; but Gran'papa's method of magnifying, clarifying the old-fashioned deities of an art dictionary into solid, satisfactory men and women, had also its charm for her. And the woman in her, that must dislike change of any kind, found Gran'papa the more dependable. Justin had such different interests each holidays (he left delicious books behind him when he went back to college) that it was difficult to keep up; but Gran'papa would, on any given evening, be found reading the *Noctes Ambrosianæ* with the same absorption as on any previous evening of all Laura's years: Gran'papa could be trusted to say—"Pretty enough, pretty enough—but what about feet? Hands and feet, my dear, hands and feet, if you want to learn to draw," when he was shown the latest 'head' (there were half a dozen battered casts for the borrowing—Cæsar, Clytie, Antinous—in the village schools) upon which Laura had spent herself and her time and her beautiful fourpenny indiarubber.

Yes—Gran'papa was dependable. He damped her, but she was already intelligent enough to enjoy the tingle of his cold water, and, always protesting, to know him in the right. Yet how she grudged him his rightness! At twelve years old there is not much charm in a plaster cast of a foot or in a muscular gentleman with his skin off, when Clytie, half enchanted, smiles from her petals, and you have made up your mind to do the most beautiful copy of her that the world has ever seen by lunch-time, only coloured, pale pink Clytie and orange sunflower, and send it in to the Academy and get made an R.A. like Angelica Kaufmann, who wasn't even English, as a little surprise for Justin.

She was always, in secret, fantastically ambitious, but her R.A. was one cobweb with her Helen of Troyship (you should have seen Laura going straight to headquarters—Olympus—and talking out the whole wretched business with Zeus) or with the regency she undertook after delivering up Elizabeth (in chains) to Mary Queen of Scots, re-instated and regal and happily converted to Protestantism entirely through Laura's indefatigable personal exertions. For Laura, to Aunt Adela's edified relief, was whole-heartedly Anglican, in spite of having to learn collects. She did not explain, if she knew it, that church was a perpetual joy because it had three stained-glass windows with crimson figures, black crimson like the darkest carnations in the big border, or Gran'papa's port, a crimson to make a small girl squirm with inexplicable pleasure: and because she could sit there and plan out the frescoes she would one day, when she was grown-up and an R.A., paint all over the white-washed walls and up into the barred ceiling, being conveyed thither nightly by the Archangel Raphael, who used to paint pictures too, in Rome, before he was made a seraph, and so would naturally be interested. The congregation, of course, were to be kept in ignorance of the artist and a weekly increasing amazement until it was finished. All but Justin. She would simply have to tell Justin. . . .

That characteristic thought would be realized in characteristic fashion. She was always dying to talk to him, and there was never any time; for Justin, even when not enclouded in a silence that might not be broken, a silence which always made Laura, quite unnecessarily, feel rebuked, must still be considered, at any rate in his twenties, to have enjoyed life most in monologue. So Laura, obedient to the latest addition to her Codex Justinianus, "Never worry him to talk," evolved a system of imaginary conversations which more or less satisfied her. She invented a Justin of her own, a Justin identical in speech and manner and appearance, a Justin who accompanied her wherever she went, into whose sympathetic ear she poured, with a sort of passionate vivacity, every thought and wish and fear and marvel of her developing mind.

It was curious to catch her unawares, to see her trotting

down a garden path, obviously absorbed in a discussion that required nods and laughter and expressive hands, and little quick, questioning, upward glances, while she endeavoured in vain to keep step with the long stride of an Invisible.

Intercourse with this Invisible who to Laura was one with—was, indeed, the real Justin, was so satisfying that when he arrived in the flesh for his holidays, she was able to be satisfactory in her turn, to exist demurely as no more than a domestic pet, with a trick of loosening his tongue for him and the still more stimulating habit of listening in intelligent admiration while it wagged.

She was quaintly accustomed, in the first half-hour of reunion, to a sensation of depression, to be chilled, startled into faint, disloyal protest—"But—but this isn't Justin! I forgot he was like this." And then she would round indignantly upon herself—"Anyhow I like him this way." But in a day or two ideal and real would have more or less melted into one again, obstinate discrepancies being explained away by Laura airily enough—"It's because I'm not grown-up." Her child's faith in that panacea was almost as strong as her faith in Justin. Yet that last would be sorely tried upon occasion. Their differences, when they occurred, were catastrophic—very funny to watch. There is the old simile of the Skye and the mastiff: or imagine, if you like, Bottom in the Bower, and Titania nearly frantic with him for not *knowing* (there's the trouble—she would not mind nearly so much if it were pure wickedness, done a-purpose) but for not *knowing* that he had just sat down so heavily upon a spread of cowslips that there is little chance of a single gold-coated pensioner being left alive when he gets up again. Not that it is fair to compare Justin with Bottom. Justin, even in the twenties, was not in the least egregious, only solid. He couldn't help it, could he, if he hadn't any faults, or that his kindly tolerance of her tantrums could drive Laura into nothing more or less than a fuming replica of her Gran'papa's canary? (You never realized how red Laura's hair was until you saw her in a passion.) But, in those encounters, there was revealed a duality of temperament, a distinction in quality, a difference in their grip of life, in the mere meaning, sometimes, that they

attached to the words they used, which made you marvel at the attraction that they undoubtedly had for each other. For if Laura enjoyed living in his pocket, Justin would have been equally disconcerted if, one fine day, he had not found her there, like his loose money, and his handkerchief, and his pencil-case, ready to his hand. Yet, as I say, they sparred. There was a clash of claims occasionally. It was not always easy to reconcile "what Mother used to do" with "Justin says."

There were the birds' eggs, for instance, cause of the most serious of their differences and the last, before she became a big girl and went away to France to be finished, as Aunt Adela phrased it. Justin, as you know, had the magpie instinct that as pleasantly infantizes the ponderous male as a pink paper cap from a cracker the bald head of an uncle at a Christmas dinner. He collected—as Brackenhurst, wisely refusing to involve itself with the objective case, would explain to its visitor behind a kid glove or a convenient Prayer Book—

"Yes—the Cloud pew—the only son. Oh, rolling! Oxford—intellectual, you know—— He collects."

Brackenhurst was right: he did collect. Collect? He trawled. There were no half-way measures. Interest him in a subject, from Cæsar's wives to Palæolithic Toothpicks, and he had no peace until he had pursued that subject, netted it, stunned it with books of reference, stripped it of its robe of mystery, taken it to pieces, turned it inside out. And finally, when it was quite dead and done for, and its poor soul fled, he would hang up the dry bones in triumph in his den and look round for some one upon whom to discharge his accumulated information.

His mother was usually the sacrifice—his mother in her pretty parlour, with Justin's Progress running round the walls chronologically, from 'Grace Darling' and 'Hope' on the orange, to Burne-Jones, 'Marriage à la Mode,' Post-Impressionism, and Japanese prints. She did not really mind, though he scraped the wall-paper dreadfully shifting things each holidays, and she couldn't see why he should insist on moving 'Wedded,' into Cook's bedroom, though Cook, of course, was very pleased. But sometimes, especially in the

Beardsley phase, she did wonder, uneasily, if she were being over-educated.

Yet his changes of view did not disturb her as they disturbed Laura, because, wise for all her simplicity, she could always trace them back, as Laura could not, to the influence of the moment. He had so many acquaintances whom he called friends, he, who had never yet felt the need of a friend.

It was always the same. Damon collected stamps for a fortnight, and Justin, Pythias of the hour, would go and do likewise, and be amazed, a year later, to find that Damon showed no interest in the three albums he had contrived to fill meanwhile, beyond merely and inaccurately protesting that the beastly things always had bored him anyway. Justin could not understand that. Through the school years, however, he had naturally attracted his like and possessed, in consequence, a heterogeneous treasury of coins, and cigarette pictures, and birds' eggs, and butterflies, and walking-sticks, and medals, all correctly labelled and cased, and faithfully supervised by Laura, into whose charge they had long ago been given, partly because he was genuinely fond of his foundling and ready to humour her, partly because he had been impressed, from the first, by her neat ways and dexterous finger-tips. He admired neatness and precision as only a thoroughly untidy man can, and Laura always knew where he had left his tobacco-pouch.

He seldom entirely outgrew his crazes, could always be fired anew by a rummage. Cigarette pictures, certainly, had definitely ceased to charm him, to the benefit of the twins (Laura, jealous-eyed, did not in the least appreciate the compliment of being passed over) but he still brought home an occasional carved stick, and his fourpenny bits and George III pennies had one by one given up their pads of honour to quite rare and beautiful coins. In fact, if he had not met Bellew——

And then it rained.

Justin yawned and fidgeted about the room, and settled down to a book and shut it up again with a bang and sent it skating across the polished table. He wanted to go out . . . He had nothing to do. . . . Vacation was rather a bore sometimes. . . . He wondered if he should get out his stamps.

. . . He hadn't looked at his stamps lately. . . . Stamps were rather a bore. . . . He yawned again.

" 'Rain, rain, go to Spain,' " chanted Laura, drumming on the glass. She was kneeling on the window-seat, looking out at the wall of wet leafage that faced her across the lawn, for the garden had been hung on the breast of deep woods. Mrs. Cloud complained that the trees darkened the house and made it damp, and Justin would offer to have them thinned, and then Mrs. Cloud would talk hurriedly about central heating, and Justin would laugh at her; because his mother had never yet been known to sanction the destruction of an acorn. She had the characteristic passion of a shy woman for trees—for the quiet, deep-rooted trees that shelter and enclose.

" 'Rain, rain——' " began Laura again, energetically.

" Oh, stow it, Laura ! " grunted Justin.

But the rain, either because, like any one else, it hates to hear its name shouted after it, or because it had been at work since seven and it was now close upon eleven o'clock, did suddenly slacken and waver in a half-hearted and apologetic fashion that was most encouraging.

" It's stopping ! It's going ! You see in five minutes ! I knew it would, or the birds wouldn't make such a row. Look at them on the lawn, Justin." She thrust her open palms out of the window to feel the weather. " It is stopping."

" Oh, by the way, that reminds me," Justin brightened. " Let's have a look at the birds' eggs. Haven't seen 'em for years." And he took the key of the fat little cabinet from a reluctant Laura. But he did not notice her reluctance. " Ever heard of Bellew ? "

" *British Feather Folk?* " Laura glanced up at a row of maroon volumes.

" Yes." Then, as he wrenched at a stiff drawer : " I say, you can't have dusted here lately."

She flushed.

" I just hate——" she was beginning, and then she checked herself. " What about him, Justin ? "

" Oh, I came across him last term. He was lecturing. I tell you, he's a man and a half. What he doesn't know about birds would go into a wren's egg. We pal'd up, rather. He's

quite young. He's made me as keen as mustard. Of course I know nothing compared with him. He spends his life at it."

"Taking birds' eggs?" enquired Laura frigidly. "Like a little boy?"

But he swept on unheeding. He had got his half-a-dozen sectioned trays pulled out and spread round him on the floor.

"Not much here," he commented disgustedly. "Sparrows and chaffinches and robins. Bellew would hoot." He laughed. "That's the right word. He's like a bird himself, you know. All the birds that ever were, rolled into one. Cocks his eye at you before he speaks and ruffles up his hair like a parrot when he's keen. I never knew such a man. They say South Kensington would give its ears for his collection. And he can tell you every blessed thing every blessed bird in England thinks, or says, or does, from the egg on. You should hear him doing the notes. Hear that blackbird in the wood? You can't tell whether that squawk is temper, or a worm gone down the wrong way, or a love affair. Nor can I. But if you got hold of Bellew——"

Laura sniffed. She was sorry, but she did not like Mr. Bellew, and she didn't care who knew it.

"It's squawking at Tom. He's always under that nest. He got two of the babies last year. And it's not a blackbird, it's a garden warbler. They always build in that tree."

"A garden warbler? How do you know?"

"*British Feather Folk*." Laura twinkled. And then—"Mother loved birds."

He scanned his trays.

"What luck! I haven't got a garden warbler. And it's stopped raining. Come on and show me the nest."

"Justin, you're not going to take the eggs?"

"Well, what do you think? I tell you I'm going in for it again—seriously. Come on."

She made no movement. He glanced up at her, surprised by her silence into an observant glance.

"What's up, Laura?"

She turned a distressed face to him.

"If you start—Wilfred and James will think they can too. And it's been so difficult to stop them."

He laughed.

"If you think you can stop kids taking eggs——"

"But they haven't. Not once. Mother hated it so. But if you start——"

"My good kid, where's the harm? Birds can't count."

She flamed up at him in her sudden way.

"Harm? How would you like having your insides blown out before you'd ever been born?"

He chuckled and took up his cap.

"Oh, rot! Come on!"

She shook her head.

"Oh, all right then!" and he ran downstairs whistling.

She sat on the window-seat, her leg tucked under her and watched him swing across the lawn and dive into the wood, and still sat there, twiddling the latch and thinking things out. After all, did it matter? . . . Birds had so many children. . . . Birds couldn't count. . . . If Justin began collecting eggs again he would be in the woods all day. . . . Would it—could it matter just going with him? . . . If one didn't take eggs oneself? . . .

But the facts were too clear for her. Birds-nesting was cruel. . . . Mother never let you. . . . There was nothing—nothing to be done. . . .

Justin had been gone ages. . . . She supposed he would be out all the morning now. . . . He had left the room in a most dreadfully untidy state. . . . Oh, well!

She set to work.

It was in a very damp heap, on a very tidy floor, that half an hour later a tactless maid discovered her. But Laura, scrambling to her feet, forestalled all comment.

"I happen," said Laura, with great dignity, "to have a little bit of a cold. It's lunch-time, isn't it? Good-bye, Mary. I'm going home now."

And home she went.

Her guardian angel was very much pleased with her. But the devil, who happened to be passing, though he offered his congratulations, opined that it would be worth his while to come back that way in a year or two.

CHAPTER X

SHE was sixteen when she discovered (inaccurately) that England is an island, that beyond its waters again there is what, superficially if deceptively, you call land, and what you call people, busy, vivid, quick-tongued, real to themselves, yet to you unconvincing, phantasmagoric, like the land and people of a play.

She was not consciously insular. On the contrary, from her railway carriage and her *pension*, her sight-seeing, her studio and her walks abroad, she looked out upon the new order of existence with fascinated and enthusiastic interest. And France responded, on occasion, with *empressement*. The glance of your average Frenchman, not necessarily discourteous, is nevertheless always and embarrassingly instructive. She had begun to realize that she was English: she was now made aware that she was good-looking. She was to take no credit; but this was her birthright and her blessing. Wonderful facts! She had her moments of pharisaic thankfulness to Providence for thus equipping her, as she plunged with zest into the new life. Like a doubtful swimmer she put a foot down, now and then, just to feel the safe English ground still under her, but secretly, shamefast: on the surface she became, with the dear, ridiculous adaptability of the teens, very French indeed—French enough, in speech and air and manner, let alone clothing, to appal Justin—but that comes later. She discovered France. She had her youthful right, I think, to a spoil or two.

It was her age of discovery. She discovered the Louvre, and love, and Wagner, and Marcel waves, and Mounet-Sully, and Botticelli, and how to put on a hat. She was greedy. She swallowed enough to give her indigestion for years, as indeed it did, and still, like a fledgeling, squawked for more;

but she enjoyed her own insatiability. If she could have had Justin, the imaginary, perceptive Justin, to talk to once a week, she would have been happy. She always missed Justin.

But among the endless other things she had also discovered that a year has only fifty-two weeks in it, fifty-two series of seven definite days, that it is no interminable road disappearing into the mists of the future, that it is no more, indeed, than a streaking drive down a Paris street, with busy months to right and left of her, like shops that she had no time to explore. Terrible, how time went, when there was so much to see, and do, and learn, before she went back to Brackenhurst. Dear old Brackenhurst! She meant to reform Brackenhurst. Justin would back her. . . . Lectures in the schools on—oh, you know, interesting people—Corneille and Racine and Anatole France (she was nothing if not catholic) and some really decent recitations at the penny readings. . . . And the drawing-room must be done up . . . black walls and futurist cushions . . . and get rid of the Landseers. . . . She should enjoy herself when she returned to Brackenhurst—if Justin backed her. . . . She wondered what he would say to the way she did her hair? . . . She couldn't think why Aunt Adela wrote such fussy letters about finding Brackenhurst quiet? Because she had been to the opera twice in a week, she supposed. . . . But Aunt Adela wouldn't understand how absurdly cheap—and besides, she had paid for it herself out of her birthday tip. . . . Aunt Adela needn't think she didn't realize how good it was of Gran'papa to send her to Paris. . . . Aunt Adela might know she would be careful. . . . But a franc was only tenpence, not a shilling . . . and she had sold the picture she had been copying at the Louvre . . . a lady, an American, had come up and liked it and bought it! Three pounds—seventy-five francs! Gran'papa needn't send her any more pocket-money: she could last for months on that. . . . As for finding Brackenhurst quiet, she meant to turn the loose-box into an *atelier* when she got back, and paint the entire village. She wondered if Gran'papa would sit to her? . . . A beard was such a comfort . . . mouths were always the trouble . . .

All this in the first months. But you can see how the old sullen, childish distrust of everybody was wearing itself out. She was astonished to find that people were inclined to like her at sight, and, intrigued by such original behaviour, she unbent, responded, and ended by acquiring in her turn a habit of appreciation.

She liked life. She liked her *pension*. She liked the courteous French girls and the bravura Americans, and their world of scent, and powder, and trim waistbelts, and Smart Sets, and candy, and complicated love affairs. It amused her immensely, and did not for an instant impress her as having anything to do with real life. Real life was the other side of the Channel. Unconsciously, however, the views of her fellows, and the books they read, their surreptitious cigarettes, and their ready and untruthful tongues, had a certain influence. She read La Rochefoucauld, with a "Yes, indeed," expression that might have tickled even that disillusioned gentleman, bought a powder-puff and sometimes remembered to use it, told a lie or two and was never found out. That impressed her. In Brackenhurst one at least had conscience-ache. She acquired a bosom friend and defended, upon occasion, two solid and reform-clad Germans from the rest of the dormitory. In return she discovered that they had adored her for weeks. She liked that. She discovered that she could talk amusingly and without effort, that it was perfectly easy to be at the top of her classes. In spite of her foreignness she became the show pupil—and she liked that too. She wished that Justin could see her sometimes. . . . She discovered that she could act (indeed some devil disposed her at charades and dressing-up, lurked behind her eyes, rapturous and Bacchanal), that she could string words together for the school plays, that she had a pretty voice, that she could captain an emergency, that, in short, she was a success. This was perfectly delightful! She only wished there were a way of telling Justin exactly what a charming person every one thought her, without appearing conceited. She tried, in one or two letters, but it couldn't be done. She had to tear them up.

She heard from Justin sometimes. They corresponded in

sets of threes and fives—letter, answer, letter—or letter, answer, letter, answer, letter—and then a pause of months. His half sheets, terse, generalizing, almost void of personality, were the events of her exile, a double source of delight. They were Justin's letters and—they had to be answered! It was in the code, you see, that you only wrote to Justin turn and turn about, and never twice running, except birthdays and Christmas and Easter or anything special, like sending a New Year parcel to Mrs. Cloud, or when you hadn't heard for a very long time; because letters bored Justin. And besides——

Certainly a changing Laura, though she herself could not have explained to you the meaning of that “and besides——”

That she was homesick for him or for home—but indeed the two words were synonyms to her—we already know; but when the prospect of a finishing school had been first mooted, she had made up her curious mind, so plastic and yet so stubborn, that she would not be silly again as she had been when she was young (surely the Great Gulf is fixed between twelve and sixteen) and that it was worth her while to buy with only two black years the chance of growing as good and great and wise as Justin—that is to say, nearly as good and as great and as wise. She knew her limitations. And then, when she came back, she would be able to be friends with Justin—real friends—not a little girl to be played with any more. . . . She would be ‘adequate’ . . . She was very jealous of that adjective. “Adequate! Oh, an awfully adequate chap!” . . . Justin was always saying that people he approved were “adequate” . . . Very good. . . . He should say so of her. . . . To that end, behold her tethered, a willing sacrifice, to a French Grammar and verbs of unmentionable irregularity!

Also, a second motive for docility, there were studios in Paris—pictures—statues of the gods—teachers of the Arts—one Rodin and a thing called a *Salon*. She might learn to paint, really paint!

She got her way. She had been sent to a quiet, middle-class *pension*, owned by intelligent women, who taught the newcomers themselves, while the French girls and the more

advanced foreigners attended various classes. It was easy to find a studio for Laura.

And so, for nearly two years, she worked three days a week, and for three days sat enchanted, soaking herself in strange oils, smeared from her eyebrows to her aching palette thumb, painting portraits and dreaming dreams. And tragic Monsieur La Motte, that great artist who could not paint, who taught victoriously by word of mouth, because his art must out and his hands could not obey him, Monsieur La Motte, swan-herd fallen on hard times, yet ever alert for a cygnet in the gaggle of geese he must drive for a living, Monsieur La Motte watched and peered and waited. At last, when her two years were nearly at an end, and the studio-talk that frothed like a fountain was less of Cubism and the expensiveness of rose-madder, Ingres, Bergson, Strindberg, symbolic colour schemes and *the Eternal Return* (for they were an enquiring, philosophical crew) and more and more and ever more of England and its delectable villages, high in the Kentish hills, he could contain himself no longer. He assumed his conspiratorial hat and went, then and there, to call upon his old friends the Demoiselles Dunois.

Here, he explained, was his chance. Here was the pupil for whom he had waited. Talent—enormous talent. Genius? Ah, that was another matter—that he could not say—not yet—(he spoke as might a doctor, finger on pulse, awaiting the crisis) but talent there was by the potful, talent to deceive the crowd, and, he bade them observe, a temperament to back it. Fire was there, mingling paradoxically with the cold English blood, like the abominable English drink, the cold yet burning ouiski-soda. Not for nothing had the door between *atelier* and Monsieur's sanctum stood ajar. Could he have Mademoiselle Valentine for two years, only two years—they should see what they should see! But he understood it was a question of expense. Now would it not be possible—?

His black eyes and his pointed beard and his long yellow fingers all twinkled together as he elaborated his ideas, till he looked like a *Svengali* possessed by the spirit of *Mr. Samuel Pickwick*. The Demoiselles Dunois, who admired him immensely, and were fond, too, of Laura, responded with

enthusiasm. Heads together over the coffee cups they hatched their kindly plot.

But other folk, fortunately or not, had been plotting too. Mrs. Cloud dreaded the March winds as she did not dread the still cold of true winter weather. Justin, at home six months now, was growing restless again though his lounge round the world had bored him at the time. He had started out in high enough spirits and with more money in his pockets than is good for the youthful male. But he had not the knack of enjoying himself illegitimately. He was virtuous, because vice did not appeal to him and he had not the inquisitiveness of little minds. Yet he cried for Our Lady the Moon, like any other youngster. It was borne in upon him that he was plodding through enchanted lands with the thoroughness of a typical tourist, and it annoyed him hugely. Yet he had no notion of how to help himself. He was relieved to get home again. His mother was very sweet. He enjoyed unpacking the spoils of his comfortable Odyssey and scattering them about the house, though the birds'-egg collection still held the place of honour in his den. It was considerably enlarged since the days of Laura's protest, and he was tenacious of old likes and dislikes. One of the first visits he paid on his return was to Bellew, who welcomed him with chirrups of pleasure. Everybody was always delighted to see Justin. He had, quite unconsciously, the disarming assurance of the big strange dog with the wet coat, who greets you with vigorous affection at church parade. Why shouldn't you be pleased to see him? And you are, you know, in spite of splashed taffetas. You cannot help yourself.

Bellew and Justin picked up their acquaintance where they had dropped it eighteen months before, and agreed better than ever, enjoying, not so much each other, as their common interest in a common hobby. Bellew even talked tentatively of the voyage he intended to make up the coast, and on to the Hebrides to take photographs of sea-birds and their nests for his new book. He needed an active assistant. But Justin, tempted, was non-committal. He was only just home. His mother did not grow younger. He was too fond of her even to tell her of the idea lest she should insist, yet, with

time heavy on his hands, it made him restless, the readier for a change when she, coughing a little and looking, in spite of her comfortable house and the furs from Russia, a frail, nipped leaf of a woman, talked of the Riviera—or Italy? She had not been to Italy since her honeymoon, and Justin, for all his globe-trotting, had not been at all. What about Italy? Italy would be delightful if Justin wouldn't find it dull, with just the two of them?

It was then that Justin said—I am always glad that it was Justin who said—

“ Well, what about Laura ? ”

CHAPTER XI

WELL, what about Laura?

Will you take a peep at Laura, in bed with the remains of a cold, on her chill March birthday—Laura, very sorry for herself, languidly undoing her presents—miraculously cured by the arrival of The Letter?

You and I, of course, can sympathize—would dearly love a trip to Italy with the right people. But there we pause.

But be eighteen: be soaked to your crude soul in art, and the literature and the history and the legend of art, till Colour is your romance and Line your religion, and gradually, inevitably, Italy, that tenth muse, grows in your mind as love grows, from a mere word to an idea, from an idea to a symbol, from a symbol to a real presence that will not be denied, that calls to you as the Holy Places called to the Crusaders long ago. And if into the bargain you have been homesick——

Be eighteen and homesick—it is worth your while—before you go to Italy with Justin and Mrs. Cloud!

Italy and Justin—Justin and Italy! It was beyond belief. One delight, indeed, so far neutralized the other, that she did at last attain a state of calm, 'French calm,' in which she wound up her affairs, packed her trunk—she would not travel for a week, but she packed her trunk that day—and, interviewing the Demoiselles Dunois, broke the miraculous news.

It was almost inevitable, while Life, like Monna Lisa, wears her little crooked smile, that Laura should have overwhelmed those enthusiasts at the instant of their assembly to do the like by her. But in the joyous hubbub of keys and speeds and gesture, their voices, as the elder, soon rose predominant, and Laura must listen while they detailed, amid appeals to Monsieur La Motte, benevolent in the seat of honour, their good-fairy plans.

The English mistress was leaving and Laura should teach in her stead, unpaid, yet with board and lodging and free mornings in return. That, they promised, should arrange itself as Monsieur decided, Monsieur who, with a generosity that was like him, was throwing open his studio to Laura, asking no more of her than that she should help, when she could, those whose talent was less than her own. For Monsieur was of opinion that she had such talent as justified—and so on, until, for sheer lack of breath they paused in delighted anticipation of her delight.

Of course she was grateful, touched and grateful. A week earlier, so kind had Paris grown, so far at times her England, she might even have been tempted. But with Mrs. Cloud's letter tucked away in her blouse, the words that were rung in her ears, 'career,' 'success,' 'ambition,' 'future,' could not convey their meaning, died away again as words, mere words.

But it was kind of them—most extraordinarily kind. She was glad (with her quick flush) that Monsieur thought she had talent—and of course it was a lovely idea—but—but—“You see—they have asked me—my friends—to go to Italy!”

They did not seem to understand.

“Italy! and my friends!” She tried to explain the situation calmly and decorously; but it was not easy:

“My friends! and I haven't seen them for two years! My *English* friends! From my home! I'm to go to Italy—to Florence—Fra Angelico—Benozzo Gozzoli—six weeks—and perhaps Rome—with my friends—my English friends!”

She was nearly crying with delight. And then, with quick compunction at their blank faces—

“But you do understand how grateful I am? I simply hate leaving. You do understand?”

The sisters assured her that they did understand. She should have her holiday, and her visit home, and then—she would come back? In two, three, four months, she would want to come back. Because a talent was a gift of God—and the school would be so proud—and, who knew, a picture in the *Salon*! Of course they understood. She should go. But afterwards—she would come back?

She was bewildered by their solicitude. It was the first time in her life that affection had come to her unsought. Its display touched her (that they should actually be fond of her !) but it embarrassed her too. She could only smile and nod and thank them again and again, and promise to think over all they had said, and write to them from Italy.

"She will come back," said the sisters confidently, when at last Laura had escaped. "So young a thing—her holiday—natural enough ! But the talent is there, as Monsieur says. And talent will out. She will come back."

Monsieur La Motte listened to them as he had listened to Laura, in silence. It was not until coffee had been served and drunk, and the dregs were cold in his cup, that he delivered himself.

"She will not come back," he decided with a sigh, as he rose to go.

"You will see ! In two months—you will see !" they consoled him sagaciously.

"She will not come back."

CHAPTER XII

SHE was to meet the Clouds at Lucerne. She had hoped for Paris, but there was the Swiss-German adorer who would not be denied. Laura never found it easy to deny. So she spent a good-natured, chafing week in the Berne household, which, falling in love with her, enthusiastically and inexorably overfed her. From that hot-bed of sentiment and rich meals the train bore her away one fine spring morning, with a pimple on her tongue, but her duty done.

It was a bother being nice to people who bored you . . . but it was the only way you could pay back the gods for being nice to you . . . ran her philosophy. She only hoped the gods would go on being nice when they met again. . . . Two years was a long time. . . . Would the gods have altered much? . . . One can't tell from photographs. . . . But gods don't alter . . . therein lies their godhead. . . . Now she, Laura—— Oh, how she wondered if he would like her in long skirts?

The train fussed into the unplatformed station-way at half-past one, and tipped her out, as it seemed afterwards, on to the very lake edge, much as an elderly fairy, with a sense of duty, drops a stray godchild in elf-land for a week; and so puffed off again in its overworked fashion, leaving her open-mouthed before the enchanted hollow of Lucerne.

She might well gasp, forgetting her holiday, forgetting even "Justin-an'-Italy," for long intoxicated minutes; for she was a painter, a painter unproven, a painter who had just sold her birthright for that same Justin-an'-Italy, but who was not therefore free of the torment of her eyes, her all-absorbing eyes and her itching finger-tips: and Lucerne was a portrait that day fit for the ten-leagued canvas and the brush of comet's hair, a king's daughter, glorious within, revealed and royal in a dazzle of blue.

It was a blue beyond belief, a blue enamelled thinly upon the gold plate of the sun, upon the antique-black of space itself. The great mountains, the rounded sky, the very air seemed carved, solidly, like the cup in the fairy tale, out of a single sapphire, fretted over with pearls that were clouds and the diamond glitter of the snow line, while far below the thin bridge lay across the lake like a felled tree in a clearing of English bluebells.

"My word!" marvelled Laura inadequately. "My word!" and then, with a deep breath—"Oh, my word!"

Her hand was at her mouth, hiding it because it trembled, as she stared and stared. She never outgrew that instinctive, characteristic gesture, that unconscious obedience to the law of her experience—"Never show what you feel." Her delight in that triumphant blue was thoughtless, almost physical: she felt it whirl her like a wind. Yet, because she must always share her good things, at the back of her mind an indignant outcry began for "all of them" in forsaken Rue Honorable.

"My word! Wouldn't they go mad! It's a shame!"

She could see the broad thumb of Monsieur plastering an imaginary canvas with unctuous blobs and quorls, and the pretty pastel ardour of Elisabeth, and the despair of the water-colourists: she heard again the rumorous voice of the *classe*, the depths and shallows of appreciation, the shared delight in vision of those who have learned, who are learning to see: and then, mingling with those familiar voices, a voice yet more familiar, uplifted in the immemorial opening—

"Pretty good, isn't it?"

"Justin!"

She wheeled. Beauty was forgotten, was a nothing, a phrase, a dead leaf. The high hills were cardboard, the sky a back-cloth and no more, for the well-to-do tweed figure, the one figure of Henry Justin Cloud.

And thus we teach Nature her place!

"Justin! Oh, how lovely! But you're not due till four! Where's Mrs. Cloud? I was just off to see the Lion. I thought there was time. You said four. Oh, I am disappointed. I meant to meet you properly, on the platform. You did say four!" She was comically unwilling to give up the picture

in her mind, of herself on the platform and the train dashing in, and the faces at the carriage window.

He explained as they shook hands and beamed at each other—

“We changed our minds—started a day sooner to break the journey for Mother. She’s at the hotel. We could nip up and see the Lion still if you liked, while she has her nap. There’s loads of time.”

Laura was all eagerness and acquiescence, and they crossed the bridge and swung off at Justin’s pace up the sweep of the road. Not that she wanted to see the Lion *qua* Lion any more, though five minutes ago she had been as earnest a sightseer as ever read an illustrated *Life of Thorwaldsen* and *What the Moon saw*. But as a mediary between her shyness and this stranger who was Justin, who had caught her before she had powdered her nose and put her thoughts in order, the Lion was invaluable. Justin, with a little help, would talk contentedly about him, and that would give her time. . . . Time for what? But that she could not have told you.

The truth was, of course, that the excitement which had sustained her for weeks was over, and its effect, like that of any other drug, wearing off. But she only knew that she was suddenly limp and shy. She smiled and talked with her mouth, but her eyes were quite grave as she watched Justin. She felt a forgotten, uneasily familiar sensation creeping over and through her, as a mist or a ghost goes through locked doors, a ghost that spoke with her own voice, whispering—“But—but this isn’t Justin? I had forgotten he was like this——”

And yet he was just the same as ever. . . . Not quite so tall, perhaps, as she had remembered him . . . or she had grown taller. . . . He was pleased to see her, she was sure, but he had nothing much to say until they reached the Lion. The Lion was most helpful. . . .

Justin explained to Laura that it was a Neo-Classic Lion, and therefore less admirable than the Lions in Trafalgar Square, which were from life—Zoo life. “I see!” said Laura. She was sure he must have been reading the same biography,

but she thought she had better not ask him. But she did ask him why he approved of the Trafalgar Square Lions when he had so often girded at 'The Monarch of the Glen' in Green Gates parlour. Justin, warming, said that Landseer was a photographer, but that photography was honestier than imitation anyway, and explained that Thorwaldsen had got his ideas from the Assyrian plaques in the British Museum. They would look them up one day when they got home again and then she would see. All this, and now that he was once started, so very much more, with such a familiar air of unburdening himself, such an assumption of her entire interest, such an implied re-definition of her status as his particular property, that the ghost melted away again, as it always did when Justin smiled at her, and she said defiantly to the Lion—

“ I don't care. I like him this way.”

CHAPTER XIII

UP and up and up went the train and Laura's spirits with it. Mrs. Cloud was in one corner of the compartment and Justin in the other, and there were two squares of glass, unlike prim English carriage windows, opening upon wonders, black mountains and clouds and brilliant grass, and under their feet, but far below, the terraced lines of the track over which they had already passed. Sometimes a drift of white hid them. Laura thought that it was smoke, but Justin said no—clouds. Imagine! She was so high up that she was looking down on clouds!

Justin laughed at her.

"Beats Beech Hill, doesn't it?"

"No, it doesn't," she said instantly; but she grew more and more excited. And all the time they talked to her and she to them—though Justin was quieter than she thought he need be when he hadn't seen her for two years—of all things under the sun and of how glad she was to see them: and the train climbed higher and higher. It stopped once, at a snow-covered siding, for them to drink coffee in inch-thick cups, and the coffee or the air, the air that was like old still wine, must have gone to Laura's head a little. She certainly talked too much, fluttering like a distracted butterfly between Paris and Justin, and the right-hand window and the left-hand window, and how was Gran'papa and Savonarola and cushions for Mrs. Cloud. She did not even stop in the tunnel. And the discarded ghost of a disappointment found that Laura was not the only person in the carriage worth haunting. Justin had smoked himself into one of his silences. He was not sure that Laura was improved. Her voice was rather high. He thought that she was showing off.

He was right. She was so desperately anxious that they should be pleased with her: and excitement had oiled her discretion. She could not resist marshalling all her acquirements at once for their inspection.

Mrs. Cloud suddenly pulled down Laura's glowing face to her and kissed it.

"I can't help it. I'm nearly bursting." Laura answered her apologetically, though she had said nothing at all. And then, with a rush, "Oh, Mrs. Cloud, you are a dear!" They perfectly understood each other.

But Justin stared at them and disapproved. It was so unlike his mother to be demonstrative . . . and he wished Laura would sit down and read. . . . She talked too much.

She did at last, as the dusk fell and they left the high lands behind them, settle down to the dear, blameless English magazines, but not before she had had him thoroughly on edge.

By the end of two days she was on edge herself. She always remembered Milan as a series of spires and roofs, up and down which she toiled after a Justin who never waited for her, who always made his remarks just too far off for her to hear what he said. And he hated repeating himself. She did not know what had come to either of them. They were always on the verge of perfect agreement or a serious quarrel and nothing ever happened, except that Justin had the bored look in his eyes that Laura dreaded, and Laura had a lump in her throat all day long.

Yet sometimes Laura wondered if she imagined the whole thing. Mrs. Cloud did not seem disturbed. Mrs. Cloud drove with them in the mornings, and rested in the afternoons, and listened to them in the evenings, and beamed at them both as if she found life as pleasant as usual. And she approved of Laura. Of that there was no doubt. It was Mrs. Cloud who nodded congratulations when Laura, on their first evening, in her first evening dress, swished her way in and out of the dining-tables, very grown-up and shy and uncomfortable. Mrs. Cloud would not have changed Justin for a dozen Lauras, and yet, watching her entry, quite alive to the heads that turned, and the murmur at the nearer tables, she wished she

had a beautiful young daughter of her own of whom to be critically proud.

"Green's your colour!" said Mrs. Cloud, as Laura settled herself. No more—but it was the accolade.

Laura blushed and glanced at Justin.

"Chianti or white wine?" he enquired with some interest.

"No, thank you. Water, please." (. . . Men were queer!)

"Oh, if you'd rather!" (. . . Odd things, women!)

It was the last straw when Art, the Italian jade, plucked at Justin's sleeve, whispering that two were company . . . and Justin went out to Pavia all by himself. Mrs. Cloud had a headache. Laura, because she felt like it, spent her afternoon at the *Campo Santo*, and, among tombs, made up her mind to have it out with Justin.

She had a certain desperate directness in emergencies that might easily have been mistaken for courage. She had quite the average capacity of a woman for subterfuge, but, linked with it, a curious dread of being spared in her turn. She could face an ugly truth, but she could not endure it tailored. She must know where she stood. She must know where she stood with Justin, risking snubs; though she dreaded being snubbed as only soft-shelled youth can. She must know what she had done wrong. She was quite sure that, whatever it was, it was her fault, because if it were not her fault, it would be Justin's. . . . And that was impossible. . . . She did not pretend to understand Justin, she knew she was not clever enough for that, but at least she realized that he had no faults. . . . She was not quite a fool. . . . There were certain inexplicabilities, of course, but they were not her presumptuous business. . . .

One does not criticize one's god, or only when one has ceased to believe in him. But God is not God when one ceases to believe in Him.

She attacked Justin the next evening, choosing the wrong moment, when he was tired, ready for a pipe and a book rather than argument. But he had been kind to her at dinner and she had made him laugh. (At least she could always make him laugh.) She thought his mood could not change in half an hour.

But it had changed. He was absorbed, if not somnolent : had not a glance to spare as she hesitated in front of him.

"Justin? Aren't you coming out again?"

He shook his head.

She looked out of the window. The moon glimmered in the white sky, thin and flat and unsubstantial, like a peeled honesty leaf: and, below, the square was glamorous. The cathedral that rose out of it, like June woods turned to stone, quivered in the warm dusk as on the verge of disenchantment. The dots of lamp-light increased like buttercups all opening at once, and among them people moved in vague masses. A shrill of voices and laughter floated upwards.

Laura turned to Justin, straining his eyes over Baedeker's *Northern Italy*. The sight of the crowd had stirred her, made her want to go down into it, just as the sight of the sea makes you want to bathe.

"It's only half-past eight," she hazarded.

He read on.

She glanced across at Mrs. Cloud, half asleep at the other end of the huge, deserted hotel sitting-room. They were the only people indoors on that warm spring night of Italy.

Suddenly she attacked him—

"Justin, you'll hurt your eyes." Then, with a curtness that was pure embarrassment, "Justin, what's the matter?"

"The matter?" He raised his eyebrows.

"Yes. I want to know." She hesitated. "Is anything wrong? Have I done anything you don't like? What makes you——?"

"What?"

"Oh, I don't know—so funny to me. So—grumpy."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know——" he began stiffly.

She flared out.

"Of course you know. It's been perfectly awful. You sit on me and sit on me—and go out by yourself—and fidget at meals when I talk——"

"I say, don't wake Mother," he warned her.

Hastily she dropped an octave.

"So I think you might tell me what's the matter," she concluded.

"Oh rot, Laura," said Justin uncomfortably. "What should be the matter?"

He waited a moment for her answer; but she said nothing: was waiting in her turn. He looked at his book.

If he once began reading again . . .

"I don't know," she said hastily, "but there is. You might tell me, Justin." She put her hand upon his open book, would not budge as he tried politely to move it. "You've got to tell me," she insisted.

It was a very young and ignorant thing to do, crudely provocative if it had not been so utterly unconscious. A woman or an older man would have laughed and understood and found it charming enough. But it annoyed Justin. He hated to be bothered. He had a keen sense of his own dignity. Above all he had a horror of being inveigled into anything approaching sentimentality. And he was out of touch with Laura. He had been prepared for a jolly little girl, not for a young woman with obvious faults and disconcerting garments. He was just too old to label her challenge 'cheek,' yet not old enough to make allowances for her hobble-dehoyhood, to differentiate between impudence and a lack of *savoir-faire*. Ever since Lucerne he had been, though he had no idea of analysing his attitude, disappointed, on the edge of boredom. He was as unaware as she herself of the beauty of her hand, he merely knew that he didn't want a great paw sprawling over his book. He wanted to say "Get out!" And she stood there and waited!

He leaned back in his chair with elaborate indifference.

"Justin?"

She was actually smiling at him—pleased, he supposed, with the success of her idiotic performance.

"I don't know that it's anything much," he was impelled to begin. "It doesn't matter anyway. It's only——" He broke off.

"Tell me," she insisted. And again he disliked her tone. Who was she to order him about? Oh, well, if she wanted it she should have it. . . .

"You're rather different from what I expected." He stopped. It was not perfectly easy, annoyed as he was.

"How?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"How?" She had a touch of colour in her cheek. Her bright eyes compelled him.

"You're—rather French, you know. You don't seem quite—natural."

"How?"

"Well, your clothes——"

Her face fell.

"Oh, Justin, don't you like them?"

"They're rather bright."

"Oh!"

He did not volunteer anything.

"What else, Justin?"

"Oh, how do I know?" He was impatient. "It's not my business. But I hate scent and chatter and high heels and things that jingle. And you come down to dinner with your hair fussed out like an actress. But it's all right, I expect."

"I see." She managed to smile at him before she swished across to the window, with the little un-English swing of her body that was another of her ways that vaguely irritated him. He made an impatient movement. Of course he didn't want to hurt her feelings, but why on earth did she worry him?

"I only mean—— You wouldn't see Mother—— Every one looks at you!" And then, "I'm sorry, Laura, but you made me say what I think."

"Of course. I'm glad. I'm glad to know what you think."

Her voice grew higher and higher as she tried to overtop the catch in it. He had put a match to her quick young pride, and it blazed and raged within her till she was quite sick with the physical pain of it. The intolerable, humiliating tears rose under her lids. Always with her back to him she took her handkerchief, screwed it to a point, and removed them with precise care. She could not quite control them, the square danced mistily, but at least she would not show a stained face. Head up before everything!

'Not natural,' 'like an actress.' . . . Oh, it wasn't fair

of Justin . . . wasn't fair not to give her time to get used to him again. . . . He'd been grown-up so much longer, but didn't he remember what it felt like to be shy and awkward and uncertain? . . . How could one cover it up but by being glib? . . . At Paris they liked her. . . . Mrs. Cloud liked her. . . . Mrs. Cloud had liked her green dress. . . . She didn't know what he meant. . . . It wasn't vanity, everybody waved their hair. . . . She couldn't help her voice being loud. . . . She had never realized that she was so full of faults. . . . She had only wanted to make herself nice—and now it was all wrong. . . . And after looking forward so to Italy. . . . Not that she cared . . . not that she cared a hang! . . .

"Don't worry, Laura!" Justin was stirred by a vague compunction, though he wished that she did not find it necessary to stand between him and the last of the light. "What does it matter? I told you—it's nothing to do with me."

She whirled round indignantly, all eyes and flame.

"Whom else has it got to do with but you and Mrs. Cloud and Gran'papa? If you feel that way I've got to alter things. It's dreadful! It's dreadful that you don't like me any more."

He was obliged to smile at that—a smile that lit up his face as sunshine brightens a room: and suddenly, for the first time since their meeting, he was at home with her again. The simplicity of her passionate distress was so familiar, so entirely the Laura he had missed, that the two alienating years were blotted out, as the darkness was blotting out Laura's skirts and offending airs and graces, leaving him his foundling again in one of her tragi-comic rages, his rum old Laura, raw from conflict with life and Aunt Adela.

She must be smoothed down! . . . She must be smoothed down at once! . . .

"Here, dry up, Laura," he advised her, "and don't talk so much. You're right, it's getting too dark to read. Come on out with me and eat spaghetti on the pavement. They say that's the thing to do when there's a moon."

For an open-mouthed moment she stared at him: then, with a comprehension of his change of attitude that was uncanny, controlled herself, controlled her choking need of a

good cry, nodded cheerfully, and ran upstairs for her hat, her old straw hat at the bottom of her trunk that she had not meant to wear in Italy.

It was going to be all right. . . . He was going to understand. . . . He was going to be himself again . . . if she only kept quiet and wore her old clothes . . . *Oh, all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord !* . . . She dashed downstairs.

It was a cloudless night. The macaroni was delicious. The clang of the trams was like Eastern music. Laura was quiet and sweet. Justin found that he was enjoying himself, and was moved to tell her all about his tour round the world, and she was deeply interested and asked extraordinarily intelligent questions, and there was no shadow upon them any more, save the shadow of the great cathedral, black and white and wonderful under the moon.

It was late when they came back to an amused, forsaken Mrs. Cloud, and were eloquent for half an hour upon moonlight and macaroni and Milan.

And Justin said good-night to Laura and shook hands with her properly instead of grunting off to bed as he generally did. He said she was to sleep well. She said she would.

Yet the dawn a few hours later, nosing damply in between venetian blinds, surprised Laura, with wet brushes and a determined mouth, still hard at work before her looking-glass, brushing, brushing, brushing the vanity out of her splendid hair.

CHAPTER XIV

MAN generalizes, woman defines.

Woman—she will nurse Tom through small-pox, flirt outrageously with Dick, and sell her soul for Harry and enjoy doing it; but refer to them, Tom, Dick and Harry, with collective benevolence as ‘humanity,’ and she yawns. She is not an altruist. She does not love in the lump. She lives her seventy odd years for the sake of—how many people? There would be a question for her fellow-man! If he whittle down the tally of his dear folk, his allies, his indispensables, just at which notch will his knife blunt, will his hand shake and refuse service? How many loves could he deny to save—how many? But you cannot imagine woman discomposed by such a problem.

He and she sit over the fire she has built, and she listens with breathless interest to his schemes for the betterment of the world, while the rest of its inhabitants drift in and out of her indifferent ken like the snow-flakes’ indistinguishable millions drifting past her window-panes. Yet this indifference is less selfishness than an armour assumed. Like any hermit crab she must borrow a shell for her excursions because she knows herself a soft-bodied creature, impressed so easily by all the other people of the world who, she asserts passionately, never can or shall impress her. She is, nevertheless, vaguely enlightened when she returns, changed a little in spite of herself, her armour dented, taught at least where it was weakest, if her fellow-man acclaim the improvement. Then there was, after all, she supposes, if she be eighteen and Laura, some use in all those other people who did not interest her . . . educational. . . . That, looking back, might have been the use and excuse for Oliver Seton. He had certainly taught her a lesson or two for which she had been anything but grateful

at the time. A stupid man. . . . She could still go pink, years later, when she thought, as she seldom did, of him and his stupidity. Poor Oliver!

From the first she was prejudiced against him. The traveling companions had been in Florence ten soft blue days, and Florence, with her palaces and wistaria and agate-coloured river, welcomed them, was kind, almost as kind as Mrs. Cloud, whose thrice-blessed headaches came on regularly every other day or so at nine in the morning, and were always over by tea-time. You might almost imagine that Florence and Mrs. Cloud, those two beautiful old women, had talked things over.

"Delighted, my dear! Just you leave them to me. You'll stay at home, of course?"

"I suppose I'd better——"

"Young folk, my dear!"

"Oh, I do so like to hear them talking," says Mrs. Cloud wistfully.

"So do I—always did. I remember listening, just such a spring as this it was—the almonds blossomed early—and—'Sandro,' she says, like a bird—'Sandro!' and throws a tulip to him over the garden wall. You know my little wild tulips?"

Mrs. Cloud knows them.

"Dear, dear, how it brings things back! But I shut all my eyes. Two was company even then. Why, you yourself, only yesterday——"

Mrs. Cloud has such a pretty laugh.

"He brought you an armful of those very same tulips—my tulips. Do you remember?"

"I remember——" says Mrs. Cloud.

Justin and Laura, of course, were no match for those conspirators, Florence and Mrs. Cloud and Mrs. Cloud's headaches; though Justin was all anxiety and eau-de-cologne, and Laura was sure she ought to stay at home as nurse. It appeared, however, that what Mrs. Cloud needed was Absolute Quiet—and I am afraid that when the novelty wore off Absolute Quiet was her portion, for Florence more than kept her promises, and, as Justin said, he didn't want his mother

to overtire herself. Of course it was the travelling—because she never used to have these headaches.

Dear Mrs. Cloud! If ever there were a woman without guile—— And yet, you know, I cannot quite believe in Mrs. Cloud's headaches.

But Justin and Laura believed in them implicitly, and brought her back menthol and aspirin from the English chemist's, and, that she might know what they had been doing, all the fat little catalogues that Justin carried, as it were card-cases, when he paid his calls upon Florence.

For Justin was never happy without a catalogue. It annoyed him sometimes that Laura had such a trick of pronouncing upon pictures without looking at the labels first. She had stood him out once that Sandro's Simonetta was nevertheless by some one else—who it was she did not care, and she never remembered names. He looked it up and proved her wrong, and then, you know, she turned out to be right after all—one of those unsettling footnotes. "Then why have it labelled 'Botticelli'?" he demanded, and Laura laughed. What did it matter as long as the picture were there? But it worried Justin. He liked things done decently and in order. Laura's irreverences upset him. And yet, one morning, when Mrs. Cloud's headache was more genuine than usual and Laura did stay behind, he found Florence dull, as dull as the world when he had travelled round it. He came home to lunch inclined to think that they might as well be moving on—what about Verona? It took an afternoon's prowl in back streets, two arguments with Laura, and a sixteenth-century cabinet, an absolute find—dirt cheap—the very thing for his eggs—completely to restore him.

But you can understand, if you are ever to understand Laura at all, how deliriously beneath her sedateness she was enjoying herself: can guess at her dismay when Justin addressed her one morning—

"I say! 'member Oliver?"

"Oliver? Oliver?" She frowned uncertainly. The name was as familiar as the pink clouds of almond blossom in the courtyard below, that reminded her every day of the tree under Justin's window-seat. You could reach out and pull

in a twig to sniff as you read Justin's books . . . the Rackhams—the *Arabian Nights*. Oh, of course. . . .

"You mean to say you don't remember Oliver?" Justin was opening his eyes widely at her over the letter he was reading. He always opened his eyes where most people would lift an eyebrow, which gave his simplest question an air of reproachful surprise that put you quite unnecessarily on the defensive. If you didn't know the answer you felt guilty. But Laura was able to run back across the years to Justin with a laugh.

"Does he—is he the one that will call you Camaralzaman?"

Justin laughed too.

"Rum kid you were. Yes. He always enquires after the harem. He won't know you again."

Laura's eyebrows were under no disabilities.

"Oh, because he's here," he answered them. "This letter's been trotting after me for weeks. Wish I'd known. We might have been bummelling about together all this time," he concluded regretfully.

"So we might!" Her tone matched his to a nicety.

"We must look him up first thing. Mother, you've got to come. You remember Oliver? It's funny we've not run into him. He's copying at the Uffizi."

"Oh! He paints!" Laura ruffled up into the comically aggressive interest that an artist or a gamecock or a pretty woman will always display when a fellow professional is mentioned. "Is he any good?"

"'Is he any good!'" Justin ruffled in his turn. He was always easily moved on behalf of his dearest friend of the hour and he had your plain man's instinctive and unbounded admiration for the creative gift. He had also his naïve conviction that its obverse, the critical faculty, must nevertheless be in himself. "Of course, I don't pretend to know anything about *painting*," Justin would prepare you, "but I know what I *like*, you know!" But thus guided he was certainly safer than most, for he had an enviable habit of liking the right things. It was as if he proved all art with the touchstone of his own unconscious honesty. Now Laura could not help persuading herself to like what Justin liked because

Justin liked it. She had resigned herself to admiring Oliver, though she was sure that she never should, before Justin had finished his eulogy.

"Whom is he under?" she demanded.

"Oh, he's on his own now, of course. I tell you, he's a big pot. He was at the Slade though, I believe."

"Oh? Oh, I knew some Slade people in Paris." And then, because she could not help it—"Their paint's awfully muddy."

Justin was deep in his letter again, but he came to the surface for a moment to say paternally—

"Oh, of course! You sketch yourself a bit, don't you? You must get him to give you some tips."

And she with a letter in her pocket at that moment, a cordial letter, an almost anxiously enquiring letter, from Monsieur La Motte! But naturally, or, if you were a man, oddly enough, it was not Justin but Oliver Seton whom she wanted to shake.

"Is he really nice? Did *you* like him?" she asked Mrs. Cloud when Justin had left the room. He never sat out other people's breakfast.

Mrs. Cloud wore her quaintly unhappy look. She disliked discussing any one whom she could not whole-heartedly praise. But Laura had a way of dragging Mrs. Cloud's opinions out of her that Mrs. Cloud, always resisting, nevertheless enjoyed almost as much as she enjoyed her son's invariable assumption that they must be the same as his own.

"He's a very clever young man. And we must be pleasant to him, Laura, for Justin's sake."

"Ah, I thought you didn't," said Laura, with satisfaction. "Now what exactly is it—conceit?"

But Mrs. Cloud said that Laura must finish her coffee, because the poor waiter was obviously wanting to clear away.

Now it must be confessed that if Mrs. Cloud and Laura shared a prejudice against that rising young artist, Oliver Weathersby Seton, the fault was as little theirs as his. Mrs. Cloud could have forgiven the inconsequence of his manner (she was not to know that he was 'Weathercock Seton' to his intimates), and Laura would have admitted that her memory of a long boy who laughed at her and talked

with his hands was pleasant enough, if Justin, in the openness of his heart, had not held forth quite so energetically upon his temperamental friend. Oliver was so brilliant, so impulsive, so affectionate, the quaintest of companions, the jolliest of merry-andrews ! Justin could not help admiring a character so different from his own in pace if not in quality : and the more he dwelt upon it, the more deeply interested in his own admiration he grew, until he worked himself up in the course of the morning from a moderate sense of friendship to a state of enthusiasm as gratifying to himself—for his temperate nature enjoyed a rousing—as it was depressing to his women-folk. There is no doubt that excessive praise of other people is hard to bear.

There was time enough, however, while they lost themselves and each other in the honeycomb of the Uffizi, and met again unexpectedly as they hunted down Oliver, for Laura to be firm with herself, to scout this ridiculous notion of sticking up her chin at him. Mrs. Cloud was right. . . . Of course she must make herself perfectly charming to Justin's friend . . . because, though she was certain to disapprove of him, it was absolutely necessary that he should approve of her. . . . Suppose he didn't like her . . . said sneery things about her to Justin ! . . . Justin was so easily influenced. . . . Was he ? She pulled herself up short. Was he ? She had never thought of that before. Yet here she was taking it for granted ! . . . And it was perfectly true. . . . He was as hard as nails . . . you could not persuade him to anything face to face. . . . but you could drop a notion into his ear, and in a week it would leaven the lump of him. . . . She knew it. She had always known it. She wondered how she knew ?

She trailed out of that room (she had lost the Clouds again) to find herself in a long remote corridor that she had not seen before. In a corner to her right a man stood and painted.

Was this Oliver ? She could not see his face, but she thought it probable. He was young, and though his clothes were Latin Quarter French, he wore them like an Englishman, an Englishman pretending that he was not in fancy dress.

She drew nearer. She was herself too hardened to an audience to be chary of watching him, but she was amused

and faintly contemptuous when she saw how instantly he was embarrassed. He had been absorbed in his work, his good work, as she critically admitted. Justin was right—the man could paint. She had never seen a better copy, unless, indeed, it had too vigorous a life of its own. She sympathized. This was no commission. She guessed him a penitent, at her own trick of subduing the artistic flesh. She observed that he had pet brushes. If this were Oliver, she might like him after all. . . .

And then, as I told you, he became aware of her, and began, like any child, to show off. He did not turn: he remained elaborately unconscious; but he intensified himself. She could not help laughing. The breathless pause, the poised brush, the accurate dab, the hasty retreat and long absorbed stare, the frantic rattle through his paint-box for the unnecessary tube, it was all familiar comedy: she had played it herself in her first nervous week at the Louvre. But he, at twenty-five—if he were Oliver he must be quite twenty-five—could not possibly be nervous any more. . . . It was pose, pure pose, very funny to watch. . . . So that was Oliver! She shrugged her shoulders and strolled on.

She would, perhaps, have had her expressive mouth more under control had she realized that a dark canvas and a sheet of glass are an excellent substitute for a mirror.

She glanced at her watch. She and Justin had their established rendezvous, but it was early yet. If this were Oliver, Justin and his mother would find him sooner or later. . . . It would have saved time if Oliver had had the sense to say what he was copying. . . . Justin, with an indulgent smile, had said that the omission was just like Oliver—"Head in the clouds as usual. You know what these geniuses are." Genius! . . . What would Justin have said if any one else had sent them trapesing up and down these endless rooms? She, Laura, did not mind for herself, of course, but poor Mrs. Cloud would be done up. . . . Even she was not sorry to rest for a moment. . . .

She sat down thankfully on a student's deserted stool. It was a warm, lax day and she was, in truth, a little dazed and overborne by the bright colours and echoing rooms and the

familiar, indescribable odour that is the breath of painted pictures, crowded hundreds of pictures, hundreds of years old. She had only to shut her eyes to be in Paris . . . in her painting apron. . . .

She shut them.

She did not actually drowse. She was aware of the discomfort of her hard seat, of herself perched stiffly upon it, and of the eternal, far-away confusion of footsteps that ticked and tapped and clattered as if the great building were the home of all the timepieces in the world ; but she was indifferent, bound by that pleasant, trancelike numbness that will overtake you sometimes in church, or in the corner seat of an express. Not an inch of her wanted to stir again : she would murder any one who disturbed her in the next hundred years, if murder were not so energetic a business. Her mind dwelt with infinite contentment on a memory it had preserved of a donor's robe that had caught her eye, shining out of some dreary acre of canvas like a geranium in a slum window. The colour made her purr as she thought of it. The sun, who never waited for the blinds'-man to finish his lunch, had arrived at the unprotected window behind her, and was kissing the back of her neck. She was as contented as a cat, and it was unforgivable of some one, some brawler at the other end of the world, to knock over a paint-box and scrape back a stool and come tearing past her like a wind, shouting—

“ Here ! Hi ! Here, I say ! Cloud ! Justin, old man ! Well now, isn't this jolly ? ”

She opened her eyes and rubbed them crossly, as a child does when you rouse it too suddenly from sleep. What was the fuss now ? Oh, there were the Clouds at last . . . and the man—her eyes sulked up the room to where the painter had been standing—then the man *was* Oliver. . . .

What an unnecessary noise he was making ! . . . And that was the third time he had shaken hands with Justin . . . both hands . . . So affected. . . . His hair was too thin to wear fluffed out, just like all the little students. . . . Now he was shaking hands again ! . . . She wondered that Justin stood it. But Justin was looking so pleased. . . .

She did not go up to them. She sat still on her stool and

watched with a disapproval that grew like a beanstalk. He, Oliver, was handsome, she supposed, if you admired the type that cried out for gold ear-rings and a razor. . . . She didn't . . . The man wasn't still a moment. . . . He talked with his whole body. . . . She could hear scraps: "My dearest fellow—— Well, I was going on, but now you've come—— Piece of luck—— Tell you what, old man—— Oh, my dear soul——" One of these Italianate, epithetical people. . . . She knew she shouldn't get on with him. . . . She wondered how much longer Justin would be content to stand there, beaming and button-holed.

And then Mrs. Cloud caught sight of her, and this Oliver person had given her a quick amused look and said something to Justin as they all moved up the gallery towards her and she came down to them.

There were introductions. Oliver gave her the prolonged and peculiarly earnest handshake which implied that his whole eager nature leaped to welcome the friend of his friend, and turning back to Justin instantly forgot all about her. He exhibited his copy to them, and told them how good it was, and what a great many people whom they did not know had said about it. His vanity was so fresh and real, so unadulterated by false modesty, that Laura should have humoured him. But she was too young, I suppose, to find it charming. It is curious how intolerant youth always remains of that youthfulest of sins. She listened, however, with merciless attention, as he talked them out of the gallery and down the staircase and along the street to a restaurant. When they all sat down together to lunch he was still talking, and Mrs. Cloud had said but half-a-dozen words and Laura not one.

It was not until the meal was nearly over that he became aware, with the uncanny sensitiveness of the egoist, that his circle was incomplete, that some one, somewhere, was not fully appreciating him. It could not be Mrs. Cloud . . . because he openly adored Mrs. Cloud, and had always been grievous that she would not let him paint her. . . . (How should he dream, when admiringly he had tried to tease her into consent, that the pretty faint colour in her cheek was not a flush of pleasure, that Mrs. Cloud was one of those rare women

who honestly believe themselves to be plain.) He did not quite understand her, he admitted; but he knew he was a favourite, because she always welcomed him so kindly. . . . It could not be Mrs. Cloud who was obstructing him. . . . Remained the girl with the red hair, and, as she lifted them, the eyes. . . .

At once he turned to her with that intimate abruptness, that serene assumption of her interest in him that was, Laura began to understand, his chief charm for Justin, who always needed helping over his preliminaries. Justin, she observed through her lashes, waited, smiling, for her answer, sure that she, too, must be finding this Oliver irresistible. It would certainly have soothed her to realize that he was anticipating with equal satisfaction her own effect upon Oliver; but she never dreamed that he was proud of her. How should she, when he did not know it himself? Yet he must have been, for he found himself distinctly irritated when he heard Laura tell Oliver that she thought Florence was very nice. He felt that she was not doing herself justice.

"Nice!!" Oliver rose like a trout to that fly.

"Don't you?" Laura looked surprised.

He drew eloquent breath.

"'Nice!' Dear lady, we're speaking of Florence—Buondelmonte's Florence—Dante's Florence—*Fiorenza, dentro dalla cerchia antica*—— Don't you realize? *They* walked and talked out in that square. From where we sit we can see Savonarola burn. This isn't a town. It's Florence, watering her flowers with heart's blood these thousand years."

"That's right, old man," Justin encouraged him.

"But it's a nice place *now*, don't you think?" said Laura.

Mrs. Cloud drank some coffee hurriedly.

"And I never dreamed the shops would be so good. Ripping hats!" Laura's candid eyes assured Oliver how pleased she was to join with him in praising Florence.

But Justin protested: he felt that Laura was being unusual. He had never seen her in such mood before, and he didn't like it.

"Laura, you've not been in one since we came!"

"Oh, but I've wanted to." She answered him with the

smile and the look that was his due: and then, "There's a hat in that street where we got the cabinet—with thistles on it—a dream——"

The change of tone as she spoke to him was too subtle for Justin's ear; but Oliver looked across at her with sudden curiosity.

"Why—why——" he began.

"Florence even provides for donkeys, doesn't she, Mr. Seton?" Laura nodded to him with the ingenuous air that he was beginning to suspect. But Justin interrupted.

"I think," he meditated paternally, "it's rather rot for you to go mistering Oliver. He knew you when you were a kid—isn't it, Mother?" He turned to Mrs. Cloud and so missed Laura's frown.

But Oliver was quicker.

"I say, Justin!" he exclaimed, "she doesn't want to. She doesn't like me. Quick! Look at her! Did you ever see anything so hostile?"

Justin turned to the inspection. And Laura, naturally, grew scarlet. She was furious. It was so perfectly true. . . . She couldn't bear the man. . . . A type she detested . . . a caricature of herself. . . . But if she didn't like him, it was no business of his to find it out. . . . It was cheek to challenge her in that way . . . to make her look a fool. . . . She wouldn't stand it. . . .

Here Oliver, watching her delightedly, fanned the flame.

"There—the colour—d'you see? Now isn't that interesting? Because everybody likes me, don't they, Justin? don't they, Mrs. Cloud? And now, I remember, you sniffed at my stuff this morning. I saw you in the glass. Now why, Miss Valentine, now why?"

"Oh, what nonsense!" That, of course, is what she should have said. That, she knew perfectly well, is what she should have said. But the politenesses had gone from her. She answered like the furious child she was.

"You pose," said Miss Valentine.

"I swear I don't!" Oliver sat up.

"I say, Laura!" Justin warned her.

"He does, Justin. I watched him before you came. Oh,

you know you do." She faced Oliver accusingly. "You were varnishing: you didn't want all that gamboge. Now, did you?"

Suddenly Oliver, who was sweet-tempered, began to laugh guiltily.

"I believe she's right! Justin—I believe she's right!"

"Yes—and knocking over your easel to look excited, and—" she thought she might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb—"and shaking hands four times running and saying to me that I didn't like you—like that. When you're a little boy it's being *enfant terrible* and funny, but when you're grown-up it's just pose."

"Now, look here—Laura!" Oliver planted his elbows squarely on the table.

"Yes—Oliver!" She met his twinkling eyes stubbornly.

"If you please, what did you call Florence just now?"

"It is a very nice place," she defended herself. There might or might not have been a dimpling of the austere lines of her mouth.

"And you talked about hat-shops."

The dimple was unmistakable. There were even signs of a second one.

"You know what I'm driving at?" he insisted.

"Oh, yes," said Laura.

"Well, then—wasn't it?"

"Wasn't it what?" said Justin.

She looked from one to another.

"Pose!" said Laura as meekly as you please.

CHAPTER XV

I WONDER, Collaborator, if you are out of humour with Laura? She has been, in the last chapter, a trifle—how shall we say?—touchy—ungracious—narrow-hearted? Has shown herself a supercilious chit?

If you thought so, there was one person at least in entire and most penitent agreement with you. Laura, at the evening ceremonial her mother had taught her, that she had never foregone—Laura, with her Bible and her good little books, holding her day in review, had already used every adjective that you offer me, over and over again, in a bewilderment at her own curmudgeonry that I, for one, find a little laughable and still more pathetic. She had her standards of conduct set up like ninepins, and when her adolescence knocked them over, who so puzzled as Laura?

She read at random—

A continual dropping on a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike.

“Ah!” thought Laura, heavily.

A gracious woman retaineth honour . . . like Mrs. Cloud . . . grave and sweet, even when she didn't like the Seton man a bit . . . Now why couldn't she, Laura, have behaved beautifully like that . . . instead of saying what she thought? . . . Yet wasn't it hypocritical not to say what one thought? What a muddle it was! . . . But she was sure she had been wrong, simply because she felt it in her bones. When the moralities failed her she always trusted to her bones. Ah, well, she must make up for it to-morrow! . . . She could always make people like her if she tried . . . and Mr. Seton had really been quite decent. . . . He might have taken offence, and then Justin would have been furious. . . . There was no reason but a Dr. Fell reason for disliking Oliver Seton, was there? Or was there? . . . She went to sleep unsatisfied.

Yet, had she read on a page or two, she would have found her answer, the answer written for her three thousand years ago—

Who is able to stand before jealousy?

If Solomon could not, with all his experience, isn't there some slight excuse for Laura Valentine?

But she was a good girl in the days that followed and a baffling one to Oliver Seton, who had delightedly foreseen squally weather. He enjoyed quarrelling with a pretty woman. But he soon agreed to agree with a dove-like Laura, and so well that Justin was gratified. For it had seemed to Justin, till she and Oliver between them disturbed him, that Laura was already greatly improved. His idea of a woman, in those dogmatical days, was the ideal of *Mr. Edmund Sparkler*, and Laura, since the evening in Milan that appeared already far away, was daily more completely fulfilling it. If she had been his favourite armchair, at arm's length from his bookshelves and the back to the light, she could not have suited him better. And, appreciating her, he was pleased that his friend should appreciate her also, and she his friend. He had been worried by their first inimical encounter. Oliver he knew for a weathercock; but Laura's opinions, negligible as he felt them to be, had always their effect on him: had, until he accounted for them, a singular and uneasy effect upon him, as of undigested apples. That Laura, *with no nonsense about her*, had seen fit to withdraw her objections, was a real if unrealized relief. That Laura, chattering nineteen to Oliver's dozen, with that ardent and enthusiastic young gentleman securely attached to her painting-apron strings, should like him in her own private heart no whit the better, simply could not occur to him.

But then there was so much that did not occur to Justin. There is an incident in the lives of those two friends of his of which he never dreamed; though it took place in the very shadow of his Roman nose; though it rankled a long while, quite three months, in Oliver's mind and to Laura was a memory that could still make her ears burn when her blushest days had grown as thin and unreal to her as the pressed flowers in her Prayer Book on Sundays.

For Oliver, inevitably, as Justin ought to have known he must, fell in love with Laura. They were always together. There is no doubt that even in winter his emotions were easy, and here was spring herself waking daily in Florence to wantoner life. He could not help feeling poetical when the sun and the bees, and now and then a butterfly, strayed in at the open doors of the galleries and the churches and the monasteries where he and Justin attended to the education of untravelled Laura—Justin olympically, Oliver with a growing conviction that she could, if she chose, have taught them both. She was diffident—Oliver wondered why—but she could be surprised into illuminating criticism, especially when Justin was out of earshot, and Oliver, in this spring mood of his, and as impressionable as only the sea or an artist can be, was quickly aware that she was good for him. Justin's tendency was to classify, to lock doors, to enclose; but she must be ever querying, opening, opening up avenues. She scattered questions like corn while they were garnering their conclusions, and Oliver was amazed to find how constantly those questions took root in him, sprouted into new thoughts, fresh, sturdy, blossom-bearing. In short, she stimulated him: set his fingers itching for his brushes. He always worked better when he had a woman in his head.

He planned a picture of her. He was an impetuous person, and he discovered in her profile and her fine meek lips a resemblance to some perfectly amazing portrait of some absolutely superb woman by that man who knocked every other Florentine into a cocked hat—what's his name?—Ghirlandaio. He was quite sure it was Ghirlandaio: remembered the picture: remembered its exact position on the left hand wall of—— Lord! didn't Justin remember? They spent a questing week scouring Florence for the Ghirlandaio before Oliver remembered that it wasn't a Ghirlandaio at all, but a Botticelli (it was a Botticelli year for Oliver) and that it wasn't in Florence either, but in London.

“A background, my dear chap! a background—divine! My word, what a blue! Like Shelley's blue dome! Like Bellini's doge—the background, not the doge, you chump! Never seen it? My God, and you live an hour from London!”

And then he had raked down Brogi's for a copy and brought it to them in triumph.

"I told you so! There you are! No, they'd only got a postcard. But if you imagine the colour" (followed the blue doge), "it's the image. I've simply got to paint her. My word, what a blind bat you are!"

But Justin sat and enjoyed him non-committally, as you see a sleepy tom enjoying the permitted onslaughts of a terrier pup.

"Can't you see it?" Oliver worried at him. He could not be contented by acquiescence. He wanted enthusiasm. "The twin—the absolute twin! It only wants a slight wave in her hair"—(Laura glanced sidelong at Justin) "to be a photograph!"

Justin, goaded into interest, stretched out a hand for the photograph, examined and returned it.

"Don't see the faintest resemblance," he pronounced.

Oliver's gesture implied that he would have torn his hair if he could have afforded it.

"Do you?" said Justin to his Echo.

"No!" said Echo, through her nose, with a clear, contemptuous little laugh that nettled Oliver.

But he didn't guess how disappointed Echo was. Echo would have been gratified if Justin had perceived that undoubtedly existing resemblance. As it was, she was merely annoyed with Oliver for making the discovery. If Justin didn't admire Laura's hair, it was certainly not Oliver's business to do so . . . She didn't like Oliver. . . . A wordy man. . . .

But she was obliged to let him paint her. She had begun by being deaf to his persuasions, for she knew what sitting meant: she had always been the sacrifice of her merciless mates in the Rue Honorine when the model had fainted or left them in the lurch. But when Oliver appealed to Justin, and Justin opened his eyes at her, what was she to do?

Sit? Of course she must sit! It would be rather a lark. They were in for a spell of rain and he was sick of churches. He always enjoyed watching Oliver work, and besides, Oliver was so awfully keen to paint her. He thought she ought to

be flattered. He would sit himself, like a shot, if his mug were any use to Oliver.

And so she sat for them, in Oliver's big cool studio that had been a palace pleasure-room once upon a time. The rest of the building, even its name, had vanished out of memory, but this one room still stood, fair and lofty as *Marina* in the bagnio, amid the vile modern cubbies clustering against its three walls like barnacles upon a shell. The fourth was all windows and a great glass door that opened upon gardens. Its lintel was upheld by columns of pinkish stone, that writhed up in foliated spirals to a crazy capital of fruits and rams' horns and ribands. In the summer, said Oliver, the vine outside came clambering in to put its tendrils and carved grapes to shame. The whitewashed walls were brilliant with Oliver's canvases, but on the ceiling there were the flakes and peelings of a fresco, still witnessing that it had once been lovely, as a skeleton leaf cries out to you that once it was green. Laura, perched on her throne, would try to decipher the dim outlines, till Oliver called to her not to pucker her face : and then she would start and lose her pose and twinkle across at Justin, while Oliver swore like a cat in Italian and apologized mellifluously in English and arranged her again to suit his difficult taste. I am afraid she was not a good sitter. She was still enough, but Oliver complained that she would not look at him. He was certainly worth looking at, as he sat in the open doorway, his dark face darker against the light, and the overladen, fantastic column rising beside him. They had an odd air of belonging to the same century. Justin, indeed, had once declared that Oliver looked like an undissipated Medici ; which did not quite please Oliver. He was young enough to deprecate the adjective. But despite his wild hair and dynamic neckerchiefs and all the other inevitable little affectations of his temperament and his trade, his good looks were undeniable, and it is possible that he did not often find his sitters unappreciative. But always Laura's eyes went through him and over him and beyond him to the loggia where Justin lounged or read aloud to them in his shy, precise sing-song, while the smoke of his smouldering pipe whorled upwards, to melt into the fine silvery rain that eddied past like

ghosts of old Florence, or to the corner where Justin raked his way through Oliver's stacked canvases and grunted out comments that set Oliver ablaze. And then Laura must jump down to see what it was all about and give her opinion, though Oliver took no notice of it, which nettled her, little as she liked him: and business would be delayed. Mrs. Cloud would come in with a basket and a Murillo's melon-boy to carry it, and they would all picnic together on the throne. And afterwards, if the sun had come out, Justin would carry them off for a drive and no more painting would be done that day.

Nevertheless the picture progressed apace. Mrs. Cloud thought it very pretty and Justin was enthusiastic, though not sufficiently enthusiastic for Oliver, for nobody's praise seemed to Oliver to do his work quite such discriminating justice as his own. Even Laura would have owned to a real admiration if Oliver had asked her. But Oliver did not ask her. Laura had protected Justin only too well. He had explained to Oliver in all good faith how well she sketched—oh, water-colour, he supposed, he didn't really know—and Oliver, with all the water-colours of all the daughters and drawing-rooms of England in his mind's eye, thought himself wise in evading the subject. His Hebe should not trip if he could help it. Naturally Laura observed his manoeuvres. If she had had more faith in herself she would have been amused by them; as it was, she was humanly annoyed. She might have made up her mind to forego her painting: she half believed she had; but it was another thing to be ignored, to sit a week watching some one else handling and mishandling the tools of your trade. Because, whatever conceit Oliver might have of himself, he could not draw. She could see all he did reflected in the mirror beside him and—he could not draw. She conceded him colour, an amazing colour; but he had no sense of discipline, of line . . . and, shades of Ingres! how he was mangling the shoulder curve! However—this with a twist of her lip—she supposed he would cover it up nicely with drapery.

"Smile, please," directed Oliver. And then, "Sweeter, my dear girl, sweeter. No, I don't want your teeth."

"Oh, I can't sit any more," said Laura suddenly, and she

jumped down in spite of his outcries. "Aren't you nearly done?"

"Pretty well." Oliver stepped back. "Like it?" he enquired politely; but he went off to unpack the luncheon basket without waiting for her answer.

Justin came up and looked over her shoulder. The canvas showed an arrangement of sunshine and white flesh and red hair, with no more than a conventional resemblance to Laura, but delicate and lovely as a bunch of shaded nasturtiums.

"Don't you like it?" he asked.

She chose her words.

"It's wonderful colour: like a fire-opal."

He nodded quickly. She always found the word he wanted.

"That's why I've bought it—at least, I'm going to—for Mother. Just the thing for the yellow parlour, isn't it?"

"Oh yes." She was pleased, tremendously pleased, that she was to live in Mrs. Cloud's drawing-room. If they hung her over the mantelpiece they would see her every evening as they sat by the fire. . . . She thought—not because it was she herself, of course, but because it was such a good piece of work—that it ought to go over the mantelpiece. . . .

"Wouldn't you give your ears to draw like that?" There was a wistfulness in Justin's voice that should have touched her. He was thinking of himself, not of her.

But she, too, was thinking of herself.

"I can," said Laura absently. And then, as he laughed—"I tell you I can, Justin! I tell you I can!"

"Can what?" Oliver came across to them with his hands full of fruit and green glasses and blue checked table-cloth, and sat himself down to butter rolls.

"Draw," said Laura stiffly, her eyes on the fire-opal shoulder-blade.

"Can you?" said Oliver in the soothing, interested voice that one uses to a child.

"Well, you may laugh," she began, but ready to laugh herself, if Justin, with a vague notion that she was making herself look foolish and a still vaguer notion that he did not like Laura to look foolish, had not interposed too peremptorily—

"Oh, dry up, Laura! Let's have lunch," and so set a match to her discretion.

She flared. It was comical to hear the personal pique and righteous artistic wrath struggling for precedence in her harangue as she dragged out Oliver's spare easel.

"You eat your lunches! Oliver, where's the michallet? And charcoal? And a board? You two think you know everything. You think I'm a fool. You think there's nothing on earth but colour. Oh, I'll show you!" And then, as the familiar delight of handling familiar tools swept over her, she suddenly added, with complete if abstracted friendliness, "Oliver—keep him quiet, won't you?"

"I'm hanged if you're going to immortalize me," began Justin. "Why not Oliver?"

"Know you better." She looked him up and down through narrowed lids. "A little more round to the right, please. Talk to him, Oliver." And she settled herself to work.

Justin chuckled. But Oliver, watching her curiously, noticing the businesslike deftness of her preparations, turned, with a touch of discomfort, to Justin.

"I say—I didn't know——" And then, in an undertone, "Is she really any good?"

Justin held out his plate.

"I always told you she was keen. Cut us another slice. I wish you were not quite so deaf," for Oliver's attention had strayed back again to Laura.

But Laura stood and watched them while her hand flashed and hesitated over her paper, with an air so impersonal in its very intentness that in some fashion it removed her from them, till at last they forgot her as one forgets the caged presence of some bright-eyed, all-attentive bird. They sat chatting together over their sandwiches, and, what with the sunshine and the tobacco smoke and the midday stillness, grew at last so drowsy that Justin, for one, jumped when Laura, with a despairing gesture that sent the charcoal flying, abandoned her easel and came to them across the room.

"Well?" Oliver roused himself.

Laura pushed aside her hair with the back of her blackened hand. She had managed in the last half-hour to make herself

more dishevelled than Oliver had ever seen her. She was flushed to the eyes and she looked dead tired. But he perceived that whatever spirit had possessed her was departed.

She answered, not him but Justin's eyes, with a shrug, half deprecating, half defiant.

"I've done. I'm afraid I've messed up the floor, Oliver. It's no good, of course. Of course I can't. Justin, I'm a conceited ass. Any lunch left? I'm starving. It's—it's an awfully tiring day." She flung herself into a chair. "Oliver, get me a glass."

But Oliver, who, with an air of amused curiosity, had strolled across to the deserted easel, was staring from her sketch to her, and from her to Justin, and so back again to the sketch. Then he whistled—a prolonged and penetrating whistle.

"Here, get up, Justin!" he commanded. "Let's have a look at you."

Justin hauled himself out of his chair with a yawn and stood to attention. Oliver looked at him, as Laura had looked, through insolent, narrowed lids: indeed, for an instant, there was the oddest likeness between them, different in type as they were. When at last he addressed her, there was a new and intimate note in his voice—

"I suppose you know what you've done?"

"I know what I've not done. I don't want butter, Oliver, I want water. I'm thirsty."

But he swept on excitedly as he went to fetch her a glass.

"Oh, you've justified yourself. I—I'm half afraid of you. How did you see all that? I never saw all that——"

"All what?" struck in Justin, as he considered himself critically, his head on one side. "What are you driving at? I think it's rather good."

Laura smiled at them both with her mouth full.

But Oliver continued to hold forth. His eyes danced. He shook a warning forefinger.

"You'll be a failure, you know. This sort of thing won't get you into academies. What's the use of painting what ought to be there? Eh? People want to be photographed. Ask Justin. Isn't that so, Justin?"

Laura flashed a dubious look at him. She was not quite sure that she approved of the tone in which he said "Ask Justin." Almost it seemed as if he implied superiority—a mutual acknowledgment of superiority to Justin . . . Cheek! . . .

She waited for Justin to assert himself. But Justin was absorbed in her drawing.

"It's quite good, isn't it?" he said to Oliver with an air of gratified surprise.

"Oh, quite good." And this time the tone was so unmistakable that Laura reddened angrily. She got up abruptly and joined them.

"Though I haven't got a nose like that. That I'll swear." Justin rubbed the original thoughtfully.

Oliver grinned.

"No. That's Caesar's beak. But you could have if you tried. Isn't that the idea, Laura? *No work done, but great works undone.* You make her tear it up, Justin. It isn't fair." And then, as Laura made a movement to obey him, "Here, what are you doing? This masterpiece is my perquisite."

"Look here, Oliver, I won't have Laura ragged." Justin had caught sight of her vexed face. "Don't you worry, Laura. It isn't half bad for a beginner. Tons better than I thought you could."

Oliver went off into one of his fits of laughter.

"*Oh, Waring, what's to really be?*" he chanted. "And the next article, please? I'm sorry, Justin. It's Browning's split infinitive, not mine."

"Isn't he a fool?" demanded Justin beaming at him.

"He's worse. He's a clever fool," said Laura darkly.

Oliver blew her a kiss.

CHAPTER XVI

LAURA, in the days that followed, could not make up her mind about Oliver: did not know what had come over him. She had always intended him to like her, though there was something in his temperament that must always prevent her from heartily liking him in her turn, good friends as they were; but she wished sometimes that he were less enthusiastic a champion. He was not satisfied with liking her: he published her abroad. He paid attention to her every trivial remark: she had known him to stop Justin himself in the middle of a sentence to listen to what she said. It was getting beyond a joke, you know. . . . And ever since that unlucky morning in the studio, he had raved about her work, calling heaven and earth and Justin to observe as remarkable a talent as ever lay snug and shameless in its napkin.

He worried at her, always before Justin, to tell him her plans and when she said she had none, explained to her with much picturesque detail exactly what she ought to be doing for the next five years. The only effect of his eloquence upon Laura was to intensify that inexplicable sensation of panic that stole over her at the thought of overleaping the gulf that daily yawned wider between her and her art; but Justin seems to have listened with some respect. At any rate, he had taken to arranging sketching expeditions for them. The plunge once taken, Laura had been too weak to refuse. She had, after all, her paints, an elbow length down her trunk. She had never been so torn in her life as she now was between this definite creative instinct of hers and the other stronger instinct that forbade it, the stronger instinct that she did not remotely understand.

They would all drive out together to some nook of the

hills, and she and Oliver would be left to their devices while Mrs. Cloud and Justin explored the village and picked up curios and ordered lunch and came back at last to see and criticize what they had done. One day Justin startled her. He took her aside.

"I say, Laura," he began solemnly, and she racked her brains to remember if she had done anything wrong. "I say, you know—if you want to go back to Paris—to train—if you feel you've got it in you——"

A future opened map-like in her mind, gorgeous, triumphant, like a bird's-eye view of an oriental city, hers, who knew, for the conquering. And again that other, unknown instinct was a mist that blotted it out. Through her thoughts she heard him—

"Of course I'm no judge, but Oliver says—I've been talking to Oliver—and you know, Laura, you've only got to tell me——" (Mrs. Cloud would have liked to be there just then to listen to Justin and love him. Any woman, Laura herself, might have loved Justin then, he was so portentous and fatherly) "—because, you know, Laura, if there's any difficulty—your grandfather—if you're worried about ways and means—you know what I mean——"

She flushed.

"Well, you needn't, you know. It could be arranged. I—Mother—Mother could fix it up for you."

Now did you ever hear of anything more kind? . . . He had actually bothered his head . . . but that, you see, was the sort of person Justin was. . . . She had always known, of course, that he was not as other men, but—wasn't it kind? . . . She was almost reverently amazed at the extraordinary, the unparalleled benevolence of this unique Justin. She did not know how she was to thank him, because, when you tried, he always jerked away from you like a pony. And yet it was indispensable to her peace of mind that he should be most gratefully thanked. Thanked, and at the same time convinced, beyond any possibility of argument, that she could not go back to Paris, that she could not be an artist, that she did not care about painting and that Oliver—but it is not necessary for me to tell you all that Laura refrained from saying about

Oliver. Indeed I have not the capacity. She was something of a specialist in adjectives.

But she contrived, in the latter end, to settle things to her satisfaction. Looking back she hardly knew how she had done it; for a young man, generously in love with his own scheme for benefiting his neighbour, is apt to be obstinate. Perhaps the fact that she was arguing, though neither of them knew it, not with him but with her own puzzled and protesting self, had something to do with her success. She was bound to convince herself.

She said—oh, she said that she had no real talent.

She said that Justin must realize by now what an exaggerated, unreliable—er—dear, Oliver was.

She said, with a sigh, that she only wished he were right; but that she had watched herself for two years now—

She said that she had given up the idea altogether.

She said that her eyes weren't very strong.

She said that she was homesick.

She said that all that, however, did not lessen his kindness, that she hadn't believed anybody could be so kind, that it was quite impossible to thank him properly: and then stopped, because she really did find it impossible.

She was perfectly sincere in every word she said, and not once, not once did she remember the good offices of the directresses and Monsieur La Motte.

There remained Oliver. She must set herself to the danaïd task of bottling-up Oliver.

She felt it to be a hopeless business. Convincing Justin was like battering down a wall, laborious, but it could be done; but convincing Oliver was like wrestling with running water. He did not resist you, he simply slipped through your fingers. He had good manners: he waited courteously while you expressed yourself; but he never listened. Just as his eyes moved incessantly while he talked to you, so you felt that his mind was, all the time, eagerly working at what he meant to go on saying when you had done. It was easier to send a boat up a torrent than to lodge a thought of your own in that fluent, brimming soul.

Perhaps she did not try hard, or if she did, for love of the

argument rather than the man. She was still young enough to believe that argument is a kind of spy-glass into a neighbour's mind instead of a cracked mirror that distorts your own. Growing bored, she had lapsed into a mere listener, except when he annoyed her. But he, finding her passivity even more provocative than her temper, could not leave her alone, and when she refused Justin's proposals and he heard of it, fell upon her with enthusiastic indignation.

"You know, I can't make you out!" Oliver prided himself on understanding women. "What made you stuff up Justin with all that rot? You're not a fool. You know what you can do. 'No real talent!' What are you driving at? That's what I want to know."

Laura studied her morning's work. It was slight enough. The sky was white, the hills were blue, and cypresses pierced the all-pervading haze of the olive groves; but Italy—Italy—was warm in every loving line of it. She realized, as she looked at it, how nearly Oliver was justified; but her only answer was a queer little fleeting smile. Sometimes it was difficult to resist Oliver. She knew exactly how he felt. She believed that that was why he annoyed her—she saw in him all the tendencies she tried to repress in herself. Here, but for the grace of—she hardly knew what—went Laura Valentine! It made her brusque with him and impatient, yet always, as I say, with a queer accompanying smile that Oliver misinterpreted. He misinterpreted it now. He thought she wanted encouraging. He warmed to her.

"My dear girl! You've got to believe in yourself. One must. I do. People won't give you sixpences for your stuff if you insist it's not worth tuppence—and after all, one's out for sixpences! You've got to be sure of yourself—so sure that you never even think of it. I am. But to sit there as you do and brood over whether you're any good——"

Again that queer smile came and went as Laura worked and listened, and again it had its effect, its odd, exciting effect upon Oliver. He felt generous, affectionate, expansive. He felt that he would do anything to help the dear girl. . . .

"Should *I* be likely to back you up?" he demanded—"if I weren't sure? Haven't I wallowed in art students? But

you"—he flung out dramatic hands—"look at those two things! Isn't your stuff up to mine? Of course! And d'you know why? The technique—excuse my saying so——" (the artist in him, the realest thing in him, was coming out again) "the technique is—oh, unlawful! utterly! but——" his hand came down heavily on her shoulder—"Oh, damn you, woman, there's religion in it!" cried Oliver. "I'll never get that. Oh, I don't mean Church of England."

Laura was no longer staring at her drawing. He was interesting her at last.

"What is it you put in?"

He shook at her impatiently as he stood behind her. There was real passion in his voice.

"I don't know." She was honestly puzzled. "I'm not bad, I know. But you—you imagine a lot." And then, consolingly, "I shouldn't worry. You just see—in ten years you'll be at the top. I'm sure of it. But I shall fizzle out. I'm bored with it already—this medium, anyhow. Oh, don't you see?" She followed up her thoughts as, exploring, one follows strange footfalls in the dark of a passage—"Don't you feel what the difference is? You—a man—a man has got to put himself into only one thing, painting or music or whatever it is. But a girl can put herself into whatever happens along. He has a gift for painting. She has just a gift. Oh, don't you see? Isn't it interesting? I never thought of it before. That's the difference between men and women. You're born craftsmen; but we—it's not the craft we care about. It's just something in us—the religion, as you say—that's got to get out somewhere—anywhere. We could be just as religious over cooking a dinner."

Oliver writhed.

"Oh, but we could. Look here—I'm doing this for my grandfather. He's never been able to afford to come to Italy. So it's got to be good—to please him. If I did it like yours, to be sold, without knowing to whom it was going—well, I couldn't do it. It wouldn't be worth doing for its own sake. I shouldn't enjoy it. You can't understand that, can you? That's because you're an artist and I'm not, and never shall be, religion or no religion."

Her brilliant face was very close to his as she sat and talked to him over her shoulder: she always lit up like a little Christmas tree when she was excited. He thought, with a touch of heady self-congratulation, that she had never talked to him like this before (forgetting how little chance he usually gave her). He did not realize how impersonal were her speculations, he marvelled merely that she should be so charming to him. "There must be some reason!" cried his eager vanity.

"Religion?" He hesitated, smiling. "I believe I know a better word."

She questioned him with a movement of her head.

"Love." He wondered how she would take it.

"Why—" she began doubtfully, "why, of course——" And then, "Oh, Oliver, I believe you're perfectly right?"

She laughed abstractedly, fingering her chalks. The suggestion had taken her fancy. It cleared up a hundred-and-one points for her. It explained so many failures and successes. Why, of course. . . . it was not the brains . . . it was the being fond of people that counted, that made you able to do things, to look pretty, to be tidy, and paint, and get on with irritating people, like Oliver and Aunt Adela . . . because you did it to please some one you were fond of. . . . It must be ghastly not to be fond of any one . . . one would miss such a lot . . . Oliver, for instance, was quite decent really, when you got to know him . . . but she would never have bothered if it hadn't been to please Justin . . . a shame . . . Poor Oliver! . . .

And so ended, a little guiltily, by smiling up at him.

And then, you know, he kissed her.

For myself, I don't blame Oliver. *In the spring*—and after all, they had been discussing love. Besides, as he said to her some hectic moments later when, in sheer breathlessness, she allowed him to speak, where was the harm? Most girls liked that sort of thing. He felt ill-used. She was old enough to play the game. . . to observe the rules that every girl, every human being, ought to know . . . She was a little fool . . . nothing in her after all . . . nothing whatever. . . .

For Laura, after one paralysed, open-mouthed moment, had

risen in her wrath (literally risen—she sent the easels flying) and overwhelmed him : and while she told him, with impassioned accuracy, what she thought of him, and Oliver rose from the wreck to answer, for characteristically his first concern had been his canvas, she scrubbed her outraged cheek with her pocket-handkerchief ; or it may have been her paint-rag, for there was little, in those days, to choose between them.

And that, curiously, infuriated Oliver. Mere angry words he was accustomed to discount, but all the irresistible apologies he had premeditated, all his assumption of *savoir-faire*, melted before the spectacle of that all too genuine disgust. There remained the raw juvenile, wanting to say : “Yah ! suppose you think that’s funny !” like a small boy quarrelling with his sister.

What he said, however, and with intense dignity, was—

“You’re only making yourself streaky. That rag’s thick with cadmium.” Then he exploded. “Look here, Laura, I’m not a disease !”

“I don’t care what you are,” she blazed. “I don’t want to discuss it. I don’t want to speak to you at all. If you’re so eaten up with conceit that I can’t be nice to you—— Oh, you don’t suppose,” she adjured him, “that I should ever have bothered to be nice to you—to *you*—except to please the Clouds ? I don’t like you. I never did like you. I don’t want to like you. Only you’re Justin’s friend, so I have to be polite to you.”

“I suppose that’s what you call it ?” he enquired bitterly : and, for an instant, she stared at him blankly, all her dignity endangered by a spasm of untimely mirth. She controlled it in a flash, and hardening from hot anger into cold, sat down again on her stool, picked up her scattered chalks and ignored him for a full quarter of an hour. But if there had been, at that critical moment, a twinkle in Oliver’s eye, I believe that she might have been jockeyed into forgiveness. It was always fatally easy to make Laura laugh.

But Oliver Weathersby Seton, jester to the world at large, had yet to learn that there was anything to laugh at in Oliver Weathersby Seton. He sat wrapped in offence, vexed indeed with himself, but, because his vanity was in shreds, doubly and

trebly vexed with the unaccommodating Laura. He thought that he had never happened on so typical a *bourgeoise* . . . it just showed how appearances could deceive even a man of his experience. . . . He would have vouched for a temperament . . . it showed in every clean-cut line of her. . . . Yet here she was, kicking up a fuss like a vicar's daughter! . . . He wondered where it would end? . . . He believed she was capable of blurting out the whole idiotic business to Mrs. Cloud . . . exaggerating, of course . . . Well, it couldn't be helped. . . . Or could it? . . . A row with Justin would be a beastly nuisance. . . . If he'd dreamed she'd take it like that . . . such a pretty girl too. . . . What a waste! Lord! what a waste! . . .

Thus Oliver to himself in the pregnant silence that had fallen upon them; while at his elbow Laura, erect, impassive, attending awfully to her work and nothing else whatever, had also her thoughts.

What a thing, what an appalling thing to happen to one! Oliver must be crazy. . . . Suppose any one. . . . Suppose, Justin—she turned cold at the mere idea—suppose Justin came to know of it. . . . Her ears began to burn. He would think that she—Laura—was the sort of girl who got herself made love to. . . . She could imagine his face and the shrug of his shoulders. . . . And she could never explain—there was never any chance of explaining things to Justin: you were summed up—judged—and irrevocable sentence passed—for a word, a luckless phrase, a nervous gaucherie . . . and you never knew exactly what you had done. . . . Hopeless to dream of explaining. . . . She supposed Oliver would be sure to tell Justin? . . . they were such friends . . .

She flushed darkly. If Oliver were such a beast as to tell Justin. . . . Oh, but surely Oliver wouldn't dream of telling Justin? . . .

Yet she grew more and more miserable.

Suppose Oliver did tell Justin? . . . Suppose Justin were absolutely disgusted? . . . Of course she couldn't ask Oliver not to tell Justin . . . quite impossible. . . . It was Oliver's business to apologize to her. . . . She never intended to speak to him again except before the Clouds. . . . But if, by

a few words, without being nice in the least. . . . She had a perfect right, if she chose, to ask him—to tell him—to order him, that is, not to tell Justin. . . .

She turned to him, her chin high, catching her breath a little.

“ Oliver ! ”

“ Er—yes,” said Oliver.

“ I want to say—I merely want to say—whatever I think of you myself—I shan’t—I don’t want you—it doesn’t seem to me necessary—to bother Mrs. Cloud.”

“ Certainly not ! ” said Oliver fervently.

There was a pause.

“ Or—or anybody,” she added lamely.

“ No—no.” He agreed with her.

Again they paused, relenting imperceptibly to each other in their mutual relief.

But Laura wanted to be quite sure.

“ So that’s settled,” she said. And then, like a woman,

“ Oh, Oliver, why were you hateful ? ”

He flung out his hands.

“ Lord knows ! ” He fidgeted. Suddenly he looked up at her with a boy’s grin. “ I say—let’s chuck it, Laura ? ”

“ Oh, well——” she said grudgingly. “ Oh, well——” And then in most casual afterthought as she turned to her boxes (it was time to pack up : she could see Mrs. Cloud and Justin far away down the road) “ And—Oliver ? You won’t tell Justin, of course ? ”

At that word a great light broke upon Oliver, a light so dazzling that quite literally he stood and blinked, and still stood, staring at Laura’s unconscious back, while it lit up and flooded and overflowed every nook and corner of his memory.

So that was why ! . . . So that, a dozen times and more, had been why ! . . . He shook with sudden laughter as he kicked himself for a fool and laughed again. He felt a new man. Here was wine for his vanity, oil for his insulted heart. It wasn’t that she didn’t appreciate him. . . . It was simply that her eyes were otherwise occupied. . . . Oh, *well* then ! . . . He hoped he was enough man of the world to understand the situation. . . .

With gusto he adopted the rôle of kindly cynic.

Bless their hearts, he wouldn't interfere. . . . But what a pair of innocents ! . . . Did they think all the world as blind as they were themselves ? . . . " Of course you won't tell Justin ? " . . . The dear girl ! . . .

Oliver, you perceive, was his jaunty self again.

But (and, you know, I like Oliver) all he said to Laura and with the utmost gravity was——

" All right ! I won't if you won't."

" Oh, I won't," she assured him.

" Then I won't," said Oliver.

And that is why Justin never knew.

CHAPTER XVII

TRAVELLING north, they travelled backwards from early summer, through late and middle spring, and came to their own hill-top at last, to find the roads still grey and wrinkled with winter mud, and only the beeches green, for Brackenhurst was always three weeks behind the rest of Kent. Laura settled down with touching good faith to enjoy her spring all over again and more completely than before, because Oliver was left behind in Italy and could not interrupt. She actually believed, you see, that life will give you the same good gift twice over. Oh, of course, she did not expect to see so much of Justin now that she was at home. . . . Importantly she acknowledged her duties, her social and parochial duties, to Gran'papa and Aunt Adela and Brackenhurst. . . . And Justin would be going to business. . . . She was vague about his income and responsibilities, but she took it for granted that his days would be fully employed.

They were, but not as she expected. Aunt Adela was quite horrified when Laura's notions were accidentally conveyed to her.

"Oh no, my dear, why should he? Oh, of course old Mr. Cloud used to go up two or three times a week. His hobby—there was no real necessity. Besides, it's been a company for years now. Mrs. Gedge told me so. Mrs. Gedge has shares. And Mrs. Cloud has money of her own as well. What should Justin Cloud go to business for?"

What indeed? Laura was only too pleased to find that Justin would have time on his hands. Firmly she suppressed the conviction of her industrious forbears, the inherited conviction that a man who did not begin work at nine in the morning and return worn out at half-past six, was somehow cheating the universe. And, since there was no need for Justin to work, set herself to help him to play.

But there again they differed.

They had talked about Architecture in the Italian playground, about Botticelli, and Carpaccio, and Dante, and Excavations, and Francis of Assisi, and Giotto, and so on steadily through the alphabet to Virgil and Zenobius. And vaguely, without actually canvassing the matter, she expected to go on thinking and talking to Justin about these entirely satisfactory and absorbing subjects for the rest of their natural lives. But she had reckoned without Justin, without old habits, and a flying visit to Bellew, and an enlarged but by no means completed collection crying out for attention. Art—when nests were tucked away in the Brackenhurst hedges and nests swinging high in the Brackenhurst woods and birds rising from every tussock of green heather on flat-topped Brackenhurst Hill to mislead the enemy? Art? Art was in Italy, or if she must cross Europe with them at Laura's invitation, Justin, like a sensible Briton, insisted on finding her lodgings in town. And there they had left her, the foreigner, the bored great lady, to yawn away her days in Chelsea attics and overheated galleries. Of course they promised to come and look her up constantly: and Laura meant, and Justin thought he meant, to keep that promise. But the train service from Brackenhurst was a slow one: and the weather was perfect.

Besides—didn't Laura understand?—he *enjoyed* pottering round the fields with a collecting box.

But after Botticelli—birds' eggs?

I know. I know. It's distressing. Naturally, you want an explanation: and if the case were a woman's, I could satisfy you. I'm sure I could; for, if you can but happen upon it, there is always sound policy behind a woman's wildest extravagance—drinks of pearl or Bartholomew Eves. But Nero fiddles because he *enjoys* fiddling and wants to see the pretty fire. And if we accept that elementality as, if not justifying, at least explaining our mere man, how much more must it suffice us in considering that amiable *reductio ad absurdum* of a man that we call a collector. I am to explain to you a collector? I am to explain why a respectable elderly lawyer runs about Epping Forest with a butterfly net on Sunday

afternoons? why your favourite *jeune premier* haunts a down-at-heel farmhouse for the twin china spaniels' sake upon its parlour mantelpiece? why a square inch of orange paper changed hands the other day for near a thousand pounds? and why H. J. Cloud, Esq., after refreshing dalliance with the wonders of a wonderful world, returns, unconscious of incongruity, to his home, to his habit, to his hobby, to his beloved and incomparable birds' eggs? How can I explain? What am I to say? Collectors are made that way. We must accept them as we accept love, or triplets, or earthquakes, as eccentricities of Nature, unaccountable but interesting.

Besides, I collect pewter myself.

So taking Justin for granted—— But that, you see, is what Laura could not do.

Here was Justin, with his years, his brains, his position—— why——why——he had been to Oxford! He would have been a B.A. if he hadn't had influenza! He had been round the world! He knew interesting people! He had once been to dinner with Mr. Wells! A man like Justin could do anything he chose——go into Parliament——write a book (she was convinced that he could write a book if he would only take the trouble, for there was a something about his letters . . .) and here he was, settling down to——to collecting birds' eggs! Birds' eggs!!

She put it to him once in desperation——“Why birds' eggs?”

But then, as Justin said to her——“Why not?”

They never got farther than that.

But it was patent that Laura, slightly annoying to Justin though her attitude might be, must stick to her principles and remain aloof. And for a wavering, half-hearted week or two she did remain aloof, attending strictly to her own affairs, settling down to quiet life in Brackenhurst, to dusting the drawing-room and paying calls with Aunt Adela and bearing with a Gran'papa grown no younger and no less tetchy in two years. Out of the tail of her eye, however, she could observe Justin, missing her but little, it seemed, as, his camera hung from his shoulder, he passed her in Brackenhurst by-ways with a nod and a smile. That she could have borne longer, but

when she next took tea at the Priory she found that Annabel Moulde, who had also left school and put up her hair and who wore a frock and a manner that made Laura feel childish, was also taking tea at the Priory, and that Justin (who had never liked Annabel) was nevertheless confiding to her, over chocolate *éclair*s, items of oological interest that he ought to have been telling Laura. (Surely he ought to have been telling them to Laura?)

She said less about cruelty to parent birds, and the comparative value of a dead shell and a live songster as she stood beside Justin ten minutes later at his open cabinet and admired a fortnight's spoils. Justin (I do not know why) had asked her to come and look at them, and Annabel (I do not know how) had been left in the drawing-room to talk to Mrs. Cloud. Annabel was calling on Mrs. Cloud, wasn't she?

And Laura went out with Justin the next morning by invitation, and was sound on the axiom that birds could not count. On the following afternoon she was the proud discoverer of a willow-wren's nest that Justin had overlooked, and their Saturday whole-day expedition to the Warren Woods beyond Beech Hill was such a success that it became a weekly institution.

Behold her then, one warm Friday night of June, retiring to bed at ten o'clock after a day of virtue and housewifery. Aunt Adela was away for the week-end: and after turning out the dining-room with Maud Ann; impressing her idea of chervil salad (acquired from sundry student festivals in forsaken Rue Honorine) upon Aunt Adela's severely British cook; entertaining the Vicarage, that always mistook at-home days, with tea and small-talk; and playing double-dummy, grimly, with Gran'papa all the long light beckoning evening, she felt that she was at last and indeed a grown-up lady; but that as long as she had her Saturdays with Justin she could bear it. Behold her further, producing from the bottom of her hat-box a most private store of candles (Aunt Adela did not approve of young people reading in bed) washing out her newest blouse and ironing it then and there with the spirit iron that Mrs. Cloud had given her in Italy, and thereafter, tucked up in bed, absorbed in a *chronique scandaleuse*, with

plates, of the thrush family (order Passeres), not to mention their cousins the warblers and the white-throats, and their collaterals the tits and the finches and the pipits and the shrikes, and so leave her, at last, in the dazed middle of a sentence, to sleep and the shifting pageant of her dreams.

CHAPTER XVIII

LAURA was awakened by a soft warmth upon her cheek, a touch that might have been a kiss or a drifting feather or her kitten's tentative paw, but was, when she lifted lazy hands to it, no more than a beam of sunshine, a finger-tip of morning, thrust in between thick hangings to rouse a votary.

She was out of bed in an instant, barefooted and clear-eyed, paying her vows in deep breaths of pure pleasure, while the hoarse jingle of the curtain rings, as she pulled them apart, attuned like a clash of cymbals to the choruses of the birds.

Early as it was, the dawn, dewy, startled, fugitive, had disappeared and the perfect day spread itself before her, arrogantly, from hill to hill, a peacock trailing splendours of blue and green and gold. Already earth-line and sky-line were melting into one, and the distant valleys and the little red-capped villages were half hidden in a quivering haze of heat. The breeze, tiny and half asleep, was burdened with the scents of a hundred fields and woods and gardens. The church clock, chiming five, sang seconds to the treble of the larks and in the roses at her elbow the bees boomed out their bass. And the sunlight, like the Spirit of God, brooded over the beautiful land.

She leaned out and caught at the great barbed ropes of briar swinging loose from the wall, and pulled them up to her to plunge with the greater ease face and neck into the massed delicacy of the roses, pink and white and cream, twenty sisters to a stalk: and drew back at last, too drenched with dew to think of bed again, to have her bath and plan over the expedition to come.

She sang herself joyful little songs as she sponged and splashed, till old Mr. Valentine at the other side of the wall, an early reader if not an early riser, drew the bedclothes about

his afflicted ears. Grandfather and granddaughter shared an inability to keep in tune that was as constant as their wincing criticism of tunelessness in other folk. They were both fond of music; yet, where music was concerned, they had no sympathy whatever with each other. Gran'papa, an hour later, before his study window, his fiddle at his chin, filled the house with the staccato of *Duncan Gray has come to woo*, and was perfectly happy. But Laura, setting the breakfast table, wondered merely how long the canary would stand it and was impishly ready to applaud, with a chuckle and a chink of cups, when the sudden spate of shrill, contemptuous melody poured through the house like sunlight and left Gran'papa's tune to glimmer wretchedly like a day-foundered glow-worm or belated will o' the wisp.

But who could expect Laura to have thoughts or sympathies for a grandfather when there was Cook to be interviewed, and a luncheon basket packed, and a new ribbon to be twisted round an old hat before ten o'clock and Justin came—or Gran'papa, fidgeted by the bustle, to remember very clearly those outings of his own with sandal shoes and a doll's sunshade fifty years ago? The pair rasped each other throughout breakfast with the sour implacability and perfect mutual understanding of a couple of croquet players.

Gran'papa bent his head reverently over his dish of whiting as Laura handed him his coffee.

"For-what-we-are-about-to-receive-may-the-Lord-make-us-truly-thankful-underdone!" he remarked.

Laura was perfunctory in her concern. She was wondering, with an eye on the egg-boiler, if the eggs were hard yet and whether Justin would eat more than three.

Gran'papa buried his hooked nose in his coffee cup, and emerged again, wiping his beard while he selected his epithet.

"Dish-water," he decided pleasantly. "And luke-warm. Another cup, if you please."

"Sorry, Gran'papa." Laura prided herself on her coffee: could not be expected to agree.

"Sorry! Sorry!" Gran'papa worried joyously at the word. "If it tread on a gentlewoman's gown or commit a murder, 'sorry' is this generation's utmost effort at apology."

Sandwiches . . . and a lettuce . . . an egg for herself and three for Justin. . . . Yes, that would do nicely. . . . Here Laura caught Mr. Valentine's eye and realized that an answer was expected.

"Oh, sorry, Gran'papa," said Laura meekly and was instantly aware that it was the wrong one.

"I assure you, my dear, that you are mistaken in thinking rudeness a sauce to good wit," said Gran'papa, always at his most Shakespearean when offended.

Laura roused herself. She knew how to appease him.

"*Why, is it not a lamentable thing, grandsire, that we should be thus afflicted by these 'Pardon me's'?*" she countered, twinkling.

He gave his gruff chuckle. His granddaughter did not wear her hair in smooth bands as a gentlewoman should: used slang (mild enough, oh, Gran'papa Valentine!) and slurred her speech in the detestable modern fashion: had, in short, innumerable faults of her own; but she could always be trusted to cap a quotation. He held out an olive branch.

"The weather seems likely to hold. You should have a pleasant picnic. You are taking——?"

"Oh, eggs and salad and bread-and-cheese, and Justin's bringing peaches and anything else going. We shall have a gorgeous spread."

"A feast," agreed Gran'papa, too graciously, "of oriental magnificence."

"Oh, you know what I mean!" Laura laughed. "Will you excuse me, Gran'papa? There's such a lot to see to still and Justin hates waiting—dislikes, I mean; sorry!"

Gran'papa hid his feelings in his newspaper.

But, hurry as Laura might, Justin was at the bow window when she returned, elbows on the sill, talking over the morning's news with Gran'papa.

"Justin! Here already? I didn't know."

"Ai didn't neu," murmured Gran'papa abstractedly. He was annoyed at the interruption.

Laura flushed. She could not bear being criticized before Justin.

"I'm awfully sorry to be late," she began.

"Awfully," commented Gran'papa with interest. "Filled, that is to say, with awe——" Then, testily—"What is the matter now, my dear?"

"I'm awf—extremely sorry to bother you, Gran'papa," said Laura patiently, "but you're sitting on the lettuce." Then to the maid crossing the hall—"Cook! Cook! Oh, Cook, you might bring me my basket, will you? I left it in the kitchen."

"*Her voice was ever soft,*" confided Gran'papa to Justin as he reseated himself—"gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman!"

Justin nodded.

"That always reminds me of Mother. All women squeak, it seems to me, except Mother. Laura's not half so bad as some, though, except when she gets excited." He smiled at her generously. "Hurry up, old thing! What an age you are!"

"I am hurrying. I'm hurrying as much as ever I can. Can't you see I'm hurrying?" Laura, badgered beyond endurance, jabbed her hat-pins through her hat and made heatedly for the door.

But she turned again, my tender-conscienced Laura, to say pleasantly—

"You've got the paper, haven't you? Good-bye, Gran'papa!"

"Goodbye," said Gran'papa, hunched in his chair like a malicious old eagle. His shoulders shook as the door closed and he gave his dry, birdlike chuckle.

"Goodbye," repeated Gran'papa with relish, and returned to his *Times*.

But Laura, edging along young cornfields in Justin's wake, had been stirred to expostulations.

"I do think you might have backed me. Gran'papa's impossible sometimes. It's absolute pedantry. And he doesn't mind who's there. He says I slur my words! I don't, do I? As if I could help it, anyhow."

"Adenoids, I expect," said Justin sympathetically. "You ought to have 'em seen to," and was surprised that Laura was silent for the next few minutes.

Not that he objected. Laura listened so well that he would have described her as a brilliant talker; but when she did talk she was always a little too quick for him. She had had, indeed, to break herself of a tendency to finish his sentences for him; for he never thought ahead, but when a question was asked him or an aspect presented, he would always pause, in his unhurried fashion, to view the matter from all points of the compass before proceeding on his conversational itinerary, and so was apt to come from a totally unexpected quarter to his impeccable conclusions. Indeed he presented his truisms with such an air of having discovered them all by himself that nine out of ten people thought him original; while the tenth—laughed and loved him. His solemnity, you see, to those discerning ones, was—and would be all his life—so disarmingly the seriousness of the small boy who, on one of his mother's at-home days, had greeted a clerical stranger encountered on the doorstep with—

“How do you do? I'm Justin Cloud. Would you like to see my football?” Then, graciously—“I keep it in the pantry.”

And in the pantry Mrs. Cloud at last discovered her rural dean, seated on the housemaid's-box and fiercely upholding Rugby football to a small and intent, but entirely unconvinced, believer in Association methods.

For Justin, then as now, was not easily shaken in his belief. He was the reverse of blatant: indeed, he seldom volunteered an opinion on any subject unasked; but once asked, he was maddeningly sure of himself. Laura always considered him her most liberal education—in self-control; for she never argued with him (and they were both young enough to revel in argument) without yearning in the latter end to shake him. Yet he had an occasional attractive way of suddenly and so sweetly seeing your point of view that you were bewildered into receiving the capitulation with extravagant gratitude and a conscience-stricken sub-conviction that he was probably right after all. But when, after hesitation, you looked up to tell him so, you would usually find that his eye and his attention had wandered past you to the new picture on the wall, or the robins on the lawn. Indeed, you would be lucky if he

had not picked up a book. To avert that catastrophe you would, if you were Laura, begin humbly and hastily to talk of something else.

So Laura, though the adenoids rankled, was at the end of her five minutes ready for him again with a more attractive subject than herself. She headed him gently towards his birds' eggs, had him perfectly contented rehearsing old finds and anticipating new ones.

And because he was happy, she was happy too. And they had a successful morning, with three redstarts' eggs in Justin's moss-lined collecting-box, and two photographs, at the end of it, and a peaceful and protracted lunch. Justin gratified Laura, as a man always does gratify a woman when he enjoys his food. It was so lucky that she had boiled that third egg. . . . She had known that two would not be enough. . .

Afterwards Justin, lulled by the sun and the silence and the scent of wild thyme, and possibly by that third egg, went to sleep: and Laura sat and watched him and compared his serene repose with the lax, crimson, open-mouthed slumber of lesser men—Wilfred and James, and gentlemen in railway carriages, and even Gran'papa. You could hear Gran'papa quite clearly on still nights. . . . But Justin stood the test of sleep. Sleep did not betray Justin or betrayed only that there was nothing to betray. For Life had dealt him no blow as she passed too close, her mighty wings had as yet but fanned him from afar. There was no signature of care or joy or sin about eyes and mouth and forehead: the face had no history: was like a fine new building, needing the scars and mellowing of time to temper it to beauty.

But Laura missed nothing. Laura, who never saw a fault in anything she loved, could not be expected to find faultlessness a flaw. If Laura thought at all, if the hot, scented quiet of the afternoon had not made her mind as drowsy as Justin's body, her thoughts were not critical, only observant, as they strayed with her eyes in a voyage of discovery over the face that she was never tired of watching.

It was so interesting to see Justin with his eyes shut. . . . It altered him . . . and the smoothing of the faint habitual frown between his brows . . . gave him—self-reliant, self-

sufficing Justin—a child's look, a defenceless look, that caused her a strange, maternal pang. It made her, she did not know why, put out her hand to him and touch the rough tweed of his coat : and so sit patiently, bent forward a little, watching over him.

He woke at last, noiselessly, as he did everything, and surprised her intent look.

"Hullo, Laura ! What's up ? "

Laura in emergency was always superb. There was not the adumbration of a pause between his question and her reply.

"A mosquito ! Keep still ! " She clapped her hands together over an imaginary insect. "They're beginning to bite. You've been asleep. Oh, look ! "

A rabbit, startled by the sudden noise, was scuttering into its hole, fatly, with a flicker of white tail.

Laura laughed.

"*The Duchess ! The Duchess ! Oh, my dear paws ! Oh, my fur and whiskers !* Did you ever see such a drunken lollop ? He was tipsy with sunshine, Justin. You know, it's most dissipated for a rabbit to be out at this hour. He ought to be in bed." She stretched out lazy arms. "Oh— isn't it hot ? How you can stand the sun pouring down on you like that ! Come into the shade, Justin—what there is of it, at least."

She moved a little, leaving him half the ragged patch of shadow from the sloe-bush under which she sat. She loved woods and shadow and cool, as Justin loved heat and sunshine and open spaces ; but unless she had owned, as she would not do, to her one vanity, her delicate skin, she was never allowed more than a sloe-bush for shelter.

But to-day Justin was ready to agree that the sun might be too hot even for him. He dragged himself into the shade and sat beside her, pulling idly at the yellow heads of hawkbit that shone like midget suns in the cropped grass, while he stared out over the wide country that ran down from the bare hot chalk slope into the green valley land, and up again to hill-tops pale as the sky.

"Not bad," he drawled at last, "not half bad ! Do *you* know anything like it ? "

Laura pronounced judgment.

"I don't believe I'm biassed. The Alps—were the Alps. And I loved the Rhone—and I've seen Italy—and I've heard Oliver talk about Greece. But all of them—all Europe—is only a setting for England—and England's only a setting for Kent—and Kent's only a setting for Brackenhurst. I believe I love Brackenhurst as if it were a person. How I shall ever leave it I don't know!"

"Leave it! Leave it! How d'you mean, leave it?" He was irritated. He always disliked even a hint of change: it implied discomfort. He shrank in angry boredom from spring-cleaning, and death, and new acquaintances.

Laura laughed.

"Oh, not for a year or two. But—dear old Gran'papa!—he's wonderful, of course. D'you know that he does his mile to the post and back every day still? Will do it. But he's eighty for all that. Is it hateful of me to think ahead?"

Justin gave his thoughtful grunt.

"Of course, if the boys helped—cared about Green Gates—we could stay on. But you know what Wilfred and James are. Besides, they're bound to get married."

He gave her a quick look. But her grave, innocent eyes were fixed on the distant hills.

Justin's grunt was more pronounced than ever.

She continued. She enjoyed submitting her simple plans. It was so seldom that Justin was in a listening mood.

"Oh, I've thought it out. When I have to—I'm going to teach. You know my literature and English are pretty good. I can get a berth at my old school any day. They've told me so. Well then, you see—if I have a screw of my own—there'll be plenty over if we let Green Gates, to take old Mrs. Golding's lodge at the top of the village. It wouldn't be fair to uproot Aunt Adela altogether. And then—" triumphantly she set the roofing on her castle-in-the-air, "I can come home for all the holidays. I shall still belong here." Then, a little anxiously—"Shan't I, Justin?"

He frowned. He did not answer her.

Her face fell.

"Don't you—— What do you think?"

"I've never heard such utter rot in my life," said Justin. He paused. He considered. Then he delivered himself, judgmatically.

"I don't like it," said Justin. "I don't like the idea. I don't like it at all. Teaching! I don't know what's got into you," he grumbled.

He was not thinking of her and she knew it. Yet his annoyance was an exquisite gratification. She knew that he would miss her, but she had not expected that he would realize it beforehand. She had looked for interest, congratulation even. She had not dared hope for concern.

"You know," he pursued, "the old lady won't like it either. "She's got so used to you."

He was distinctly worried.

"So have I, for that matter," he volunteered.

He fidgeted with his ear.

"It's a problem," he said.

Laura said nothing.

"Isn't it? he appealed to her in his turn.

She roused herself.

"Oh no! I've practically decided it all. Aunt Adela will expect me to make up her mind, just as Gran'papa does for her now. It will work all right."

"There are all those eggs and things to be seen to when I'm away. And not a maid I can trust!" He laughed; yet there was a touch of real injury in his tone. "I suppose you haven't thought of that?"

"Oh, Justin—I'd stay if I could," said Laura piteously. "You don't suppose I shall enjoy leaving—home?"

"Well, but—look here——" He paused again.

"I shall be back for all the holidays," she consoled herself and him. "And your mother isn't bed-ridden, you know. There'll be plenty to take my place."

"Yes, but she'll miss you."

"I hope so," said Laura wistfully.

He flushed.

"I daresay you'll be surprised to hear me say so," he prepared her, "but so shall I."

Laura glowed.

"I'm awfully glad."

"But why should you——" he began again.

"Not yet, Justin. Gran'papa may live another two years. But he's breaking up. I noticed the difference at once. It's the winter that the doctor is afraid of—poor Gran'papa!"

"But even then——" Justin pursued his own thoughts. Then with an effort: "Look here! Why shouldn't you—Why shouldn't we—I mean—— Look here, Laura! Would you care to stay on here—marry me? Then we needn't have any upset."

"Justin!"

"Will you? Honestly—it wouldn't be a bit a bad idea."

Laura faced him with grave, scarlet-cheeked dignity.

"I don't think—I don't think—I don't like that sort of joke. It's not like you. It's hateful!" She was intensely distressed.

He opened his serious eyes.

"Joke?"

She stared at him, lips parted.

"Justin! You can't mean—you couldn't mean—— Aren't you pulling my leg? Justin, you couldn't possibly be in earnest?"

Some depth in his nature was stirred by her tone. He leant forward quite eagerly.

"Will you marry me, then? Naturally I'm in earnest. I'm awfully fond of you—really. And the old lady will be tremendously pleased. Will you marry me?"

She looked at him, breathless, her lips trembling, day dawning in her eyes.

"Oh, Justin—oh, Justin—what do you think? Of course I will!"

"That's all right then!"

There was naïve complacency in his tone: it expressed his sense of a wise measure successfully concluded—no more. No more—yet, for an instant, he had remained leaning towards her with the strangest mingling of indecision, emotion and intention in his pose, as if his body were wiser than his soul.

But she, because she was frightened of her own happiness,

and of him and his quick movement, sat quite still, restraining the answering gesture that would have won him: and the moment passed like a flower without fruit. Justin, lazing back again, smiled at her with his immemorial air of comfortable affection. Dear old Laura! . . . He was satisfied—pleased with himself and her. Minor satisfactions, seen reminiscently, subconsciously, out of the tail of his mind's eye—the summer day, the summer sun, the eggs in his collecting box, the crisp, crunchable lettuce at lunch, his pipe and the smoke of his pipe—all added their mites to the sum of his content. Dear old Laura! . . .

Her voice added itself soothingly to his meditations. He thought, as he listened to her, that old Valentine had talked through his hat that morning. . . . Laura rough? Laura shrill? Why, even he himself had never noticed before how low and soft her voice was. . . .

For Laura was talking—talking for time: she feared the silence that had fallen upon them. She was not ready to be confronted with her naked bliss. Feverishly she sought for words in which to clothe, to veil it from herself. Yet she could think of nothing else. She began—

“Justin—I’ll be so good to you. You’ll see. I’ll never get in your way. I’ll learn cooking. I’ll never read books till after tea. I’ll do everything——” The sentence died away happily.

“I must say——” there was distinct gratification in Justin’s grave voice, “it seems an excellent idea. I wonder I never thought of it before. Mother’ll be awfully bucked. She likes you, you know.” He paused for Laura’s gratitude.

But Laura, her heart full of dreams, forgot to respond.

“And I can tell you, you ought to be jolly pleased. It isn’t every one Mother likes,” he added impressively.

“Of course I’m pleased.” Laura smiled. “But I knew she did, Justin. She was always good to me. It was you—I didn’t know—I never thought——” She checked herself prettily.

“That’s why,” he continued calmly, “it seems such a good arrangement. You know, I never have liked the idea of her being alone when I’m away: only she never will have any one

but old Mary. But if I knew you were in the house I shouldn't be uneasy. I shouldn't have to hurry back so, then."

She lifted her head. For an instant her eyes had a strange, wise look in them, as if some older self, till then quiescent in her, were roused in her defence—were watching him with knowledge and foreboding of pain.

The look passed in a smile, a smile at Justin verging upon unusual enthusiasm; yet, though she herself did not know it, the look had been there.

"Oh, it'll make a big difference, Laura, I can tell you," he was concluding. "All the difference in the world."

"All the difference in the world," repeated Laura after him.

"There's that expedition——" he burst out again as, his impedimenta shouldered and the greasy luncheon-papers tucked down a rabbit hole, they walked home together through the deep lanes. "You know—it's still a possibility. Bellew promised me the first refusal, though I've practically told him I couldn't manage it. And yet—to miss such a chance! But now—once we're married—eggs! Think of it, Laura! Up and down every cliff from Lundy to the Orkneys—with Bellew. *Bellew!* I tell you he knows more about birds than any man in England. Wish I weren't such a rotten sailor, but that's a detail." He drew a deep breath. "And I haven't any gulls yet, you know. Remember those specimens at old Greets' sale? I'm glad now I didn't buy 'em. Not the same—bought stuff. But to sweat up a cliff in a gale, hanging on by your teeth and your toe-nails to get at a nest yourself, with the fat old mother-bird not knowing enough to get out of your way—some'll let you lift them right off before they'll budge, you know—that'll be sport! Wish you could come."

"Wish I could. Oh, Justin—I suppose I couldn't?"

"Oh, no—it's not a woman's show," he amended hastily. "It means roughing it, you know. But when I get back," he consoled her, "you shall do all the classification. And honestly, Laura—it'll be jolly nice knowing you're at home to come back to. There'll be a heap to do, sorting, and printing photographs. By the way, you'd better keep my letters. They'll be useful to refer to."

"Yes, Justin," said Laura, as one instructed. If her thoughts turned for an instant's satisfied inspection of a certain locked box in a certain locked drawer of her dressing-table, her smile gave no hint of it to Justin. And Justin's mother was not there.

Thus ran their love-talk on that first afternoon, as they wandered home together. But even when they reached Green Gates, and Laura stood on one side of them and he on the other, Justin found it difficult to tear himself away. Between his eggs and his engagement he was nearer excitement than Laura had ever known him.

But Laura, too absorbed in him to listen to him at all, had grown quiet, so quiet that at last even he must notice and be concerned.

"Don't you think so, Laura? Laura! I say, Laura, is anything up?"

"Oh no, Justin."

He took her hand, awkwardly, through the bars of the gate, with that look of boyish, embarrassed kindness that could always make Laura, at least, give and forgive him anything.

"I say, old girl—it is all right? You are pleased too? You think it's a good idea?"

"The expedition?"

"Oh—that too! But this notion of our getting married?" She looked up at him.

"It's made me awfully happy, Justin."

"Has it? Good. That's right. So it has me. And so it will Mother. I say, I ought to be home by now—telling her. It must be near tea-time too. You're coming round to-night, aren't you?"

"I was—before——"

"Good! Come along early."

Laura flushed brightly, but she said nothing.

He looked puzzled.

"Can't you?"

Laura looked at him between laughter and that suspicious brightening of her dark eyes that had never yet had any meaning for Justin.

"I thought it was all arranged," he said rather impatiently.

“ Was it ? ” She pulled a splinter from the gate-post and with it prodded a scuttling ant up and down the little white groove.

“ Wasn’t it ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Well, then ? ”

“ You might fetch me, Justin,” said Laura desperately.

“ Oh, all right. But why ? It’s not a bit dark ! ”

Laura did not attempt to explain.

CHAPTER XIX

JUSTIN hurried off down the road. Laura waited a little while, looking after him, ready to wave and smile if he should look back. He would have seen, if he had been Oliver to perceive it, a pretty enough picture, for the rockery behind her glowed like a Persian carpet, and she stood at the gate between the copper-black hollyhocks, a *princesse lointaine* among her Nubians, looking out so eagerly over the bars, hands half raised for beckoning.

But Justin, even if he had thought of it, had not time to look back. As it was, he barely escaped being late for his tea.

Laura, when the bend of the road had quite hidden him, gave, for all her wistful last glances, a little sigh of relaxation. She had held him while she could, and counted each moment a gain; yet she had wanted him to go. Her instinct, standing godmother to her inexperience, put her on her guard, would not allow her to show him the intensity of the happiness he had created in her. Yet discretion was not easy, with the lust of self-confession—that age-old familiar of a woman in love—playing its devil's game with her self-control. She wanted to be alone—she who was Psyche in Olympus, the first draught of nectar driving dizzily through her veins: she knew she must have breathing-pause, must for an instant put down the inexhaustible cup, lest the immortal wine should choke her.

She turned from the road and swerving aside, like a shy beast, from the eyes of the many-windowed house, sped down the garden paths to the orchard, that immemorial play-ground, her kingdom of deep grass and monstrous buttercups, an Avalon at whose corners oaks stood guardian, whose brook-rooted bramble hedges, high and overhanging, walled it impenetrably against the outer world.

She did not stay to secure the rickety gate, and it clicked and cluttered behind her like a cracked bell as she ran on through the sunshine and the grass to the little shady hollow beyond the apple trees and there flung herself upon the ground, like a child dropping headlong upon its mother's lap.

And because she had no mother, and her heart was full, she turned in all simplicity to her prayers. Overhead a lark was singing, and she listened, her chin in her fists, her elbows digging into the soft earth, her broken phrases swelling his ecstasy—

"Almighty God, Father of all goodness—most humble and hearty thanks——O God, I am so utterly happy. If You only knew how grateful—how grateful—my creation and preservation and all the blessings of my life—because, of course, I see now, they were all blessings—Gran'papa and being poor and everything, or I shouldn't have known Justin. O God, I do thank You so—for making Justin and for letting me know him and for letting him care—and for all Thy goodness and loving-kindness to me and all men. I will be so good to him, God—I promise—I promise—I will always be good now. O God, teach me to be good enough and to understand him, so that he doesn't get tired: and I pray Thee give me that due sense of all Thy mercies—— Yes, I have, I have that due sense and I will show forth Thy praise, always, always—only please God, teach me to be good enough that he may never be disappointed and that I may make him happy, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen."

She ceased, exhausted by her own passion; but the lark's song continued, welling up untroubled like a spring of pure water, from the infinite calm of the sky.

CHAPTER XX

IF, a year or two later, you could have persuaded Mrs. Cloud to tell you her thoughts, she would have said that she always considered the engagement ring to be at the bottom of the whole wretched business. If Laura had begun by being firm . . . but Laura, she could not help feeling, had been lamentably wanting in backbone where Justin was concerned. . . . For Justin had his faults. . . . She was his mother, but she was not like some mothers. . . . She was perfectly willing to admit that Justin had his faults. . . . Oh, well—you could scarcely call them faults, perhaps that would be too strong, but—well, he was inclined to be dreamy sometimes : he had certainly been dreamy over the engagement ring. . . . But still, she could not help feeling that that was Laura's fault. . . . Laura should have been firm. . . .

Oh, of course, if Laura liked Justin to ride rough-shod over her, well and good ! But then she should not have turned upon him afterwards ! And that was just it—if they had been openly engaged it was quite reasonable that they should have had their differences : their slack months, so to speak, would not have mattered in the least. . . . The engagement ring would have fixed their status. . . . But as it was . . .

If Laura had had proper pride, if she had even shown that she was disappointed—for, of course, she must have been disappointed—— Oh ! (Mrs. Cloud's smile would deprecate her worldliness) if she had done no more than talk for a day or two of how fond she was of rubies or of pearls or whatever it was—why, then Justin would have got the idea well into his head, and the ring would have been bought ! Nobody could say that Justin was not generous. . . . He must have spent pounds on the books he brought back that very day for Laura. . . . But still—they weren't an engagement ring and nothing would make them one. . . .

Thus far—but you would never have got it out of her—a reminiscent Mrs. Cloud.

But besides Mrs. Cloud there had been Brackenhurst to consider. Brackenhurst also had wanted an engagement ring. Without that certificate Mr. Cloud and Miss Laura Valentine might 'understand' each other—Brackenhurst had arranged long ago for them to do that—but it could not call them engaged. Indeed, it had at last, in desperation, circulated the rumour that old Mr. Valentine had Put his Foot Down. Old Mr. Valentine, who still called his grey-haired daughter and the niece who sometimes came to stay 'the girls,' who locked the front door, winter and summer, at ten o'clock, and thereafter sat up for strayed revellers in his skull-cap and dressing-gown, with a candle in one hand and his great gold watch open in the other, and an expression upon his face that few cared to encounter twice—old Mr. Valentine, it was said, had permitted no public engagement until Laura was one-and-twenty.

It was a useful rumour, one that satisfied Brackenhurst and did not displease Mrs. Cloud. Because, you see, it would have been difficult to explain to the incredulous that there was no engagement ring on Laura's finger because—because—well, to tell you the truth (Aunt Adela would have done it more unctuously than Mrs. Cloud), the fact was that dear Justin kept on forgetting to buy one! And Laura—a good girl, but, between you and Aunt Adela, with curious ideas sometimes—apparently didn't mind! Yes. Unconventional. Very. And so was Mr. Cloud. Oh, of course, if they were satisfied—— But personally—Aunt Adela would not say so to every one—but personally, she must say—yes, exactly!

Aunt Adela would have enjoyed herself.

You do understand that it was pure absent-mindedness on Justin's part? When Justin told his mother the news and the first congratulations were over, and Mrs. Cloud had kissed him and he had re-sketched to her in delightful detail his ideas for the future, and Mrs. Cloud had neither assented nor dissented, but with her wise smile had listened and changed the subject and talked to him about Laura till he began to fidget—because, after all, he knew all about Laura, there was

nothing *new* to say of Laura exactly—after that pleasant talk had died out and they had sat silent a while, Mrs. Cloud had turned in her chair and begun to ask lighter questions and so touched upon the subject of the ring.

“Oh—the ring!” Justin opened his eyes. He had been staring at the light window till he was nearly asleep. “Oh, of course. A ring! Yes, I hadn’t thought of that. I’ll run up to town to-morrow.”

Then he had asked his mother’s advice, and they had discussed the rival merits of pearls and emeralds and old settings, till Justin, always thorough, and growing interested, had got down the *Encyclopædia* and the dictionary with plates. He had broken off in the middle to go and fetch his Laura, very full indeed of his subject. And Laura had arrived, with a shy, glowing look about her that had touched Mrs. Cloud; but they were not allowed to do more than kiss each other before Laura was engaged in discussion with Justin as to whether the biblical jasper were the modern diamond, and if not why not? They got quite heated about it. Mrs. Cloud sat by and listened, and thought how clever they both were, and that Justin was the cleverer but that Laura talked faster: and occupied herself the while with taking the exact size of Laura’s third finger from her left-hand glove. The evening was a very pleasant one, though upon the whole more instructive than romantic. Of all three, I suppose, Mrs. Cloud went to bed the happiest. Laura dreamed of a bare hillside and the scent of thyme and of a bird singing in the sun. Justin dreamed of nothing at all. But Mrs. Cloud dreamed quite shamelessly of grandchildren.

Justin went up to town the next day, only for a couple of hours, with the measurements in his pocket. He spent most of his time at South Kensington and the Jermyn Street Museum, and did not get back within the week. His crazes were always as thorough as they were sudden. He forgot all about his birds’ eggs and enjoyed himself very much: and brought back as I told you, besides a new tooth-brush, a most wonderful and expensive book on precious stones, Cellini’s treatise, Jones on finger rings, and a bound volume of the *Connoisseur* as a little present for Laura.

She was spending the afternoon with his mother on the day of his return, and after tea he laid his gifts in triumph before her. Laura could look at such books for their own sake where Mrs. Cloud looked at them for Justin's; but neither motive mattered at the moment, for Justin was still so delighted with them that at first he would hardly let any one else look at them at all. Laura, over his shoulder, was as unwearied in asking questions as he in answering, and he had more or less unburdened himself, to her intent ears, of all he had seen and learned and adventured, before Mrs. Cloud, verging on impatience with the cool ways of your modern lovers, could find a pause in which to ask about a matter of importance.

"And what else did you bring home, Justin?" She had unpacked his bag herself, but it was not there. Her eyes were doubtfully on his slim pockets.

He turned over his purchases.

"Jones—*Connoisseur*—Cellini—— Oh, yes, and there's a *Punch* in the hall—" he turned to Laura again: "—as big as a plum—and a colour! In one case alone. Oh, you've got to come up with me, Laura. You've never seen anything like it. Funny—I've passed that room dozens of times and never noticed before. But, of course, I was always after eggs."

Mrs. Cloud gave up trying to lead the conversation where she wanted it to go. She cut across it.

"Justin, I'm sure Laura is longing to see her ring."

Justin frowned absently.

"Ring? What ring? Oh—the ring! Oh, I say, Laura—I'm awfully sorry! I'm afraid I never gave it another thought."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said Laura brightly.

Mrs. Cloud said nothing emphatically, which disturbed Justin more than any disapproval of Laura's would have done. He turned blankly from his books.

"I shall be up again in a few days," he assured them. "Or I could write," he suggested unhappily. He hated writing letters.

He paused. He had an inspiration.

"I suppose you or Mother wouldn't be going up?" he wondered hopefully.

Mrs. Cloud said nothing more emphatically than ever.

"I'll go straight up again to-morrow," he decided, an eye on his mother.

Laura laughed.

"What nonsense! Why, you're only just back! And I found a cornerake's nest yesterday. Bother the old ring!"

His face cleared. He liked Laura.

"Well—if you wouldn't mind waiting till Tuesday, we might both go up. A cornerake? Which field? Any good for a photograph? The Museum's shut on Mondays. And then we could choose it together. After all, there's no hurry, is there?"

"Of course not," said Laura.

Mrs. Cloud could have shaken her.

They went up together on Tuesday, and, according to both of them, had a ripping time. But when Mrs. Cloud, alone with Laura the next day, took the girl's two hands in her own, and openly and gravely looked at them, she found the left hand as bare as the right.

"Laura!" Mrs. Cloud's voice implied that she was not at all pleased with Laura.

Laura twinkled.

"Mrs. Cloud, we were too busy. We had such a glorious day. We hadn't time, simply."

"It's ridiculous!" Mrs. Cloud's tone was sharp. She was annoyed with Justin, and she felt that it was too bad of Laura to put her in the position of being annoyed with Justin. "You might have reminded him," she said.

Laura looked at her.

"Oh—I might." Her tone was expressionless.

Mrs. Cloud's gesture disclaimed all future responsibility for any one at all in the world whatever.

"He'll think of it some time or other," Laura soothed her, with another twinkle. She sat smiling to herself over Justin and his ways and her own odd delight in humouring them. Then a new thought took her and she laughed outright. "Oliver would have had it in his pocket," she said, "months beforehand. Poor Oliver!"

She wondered idly what should bring him into her head

again. She had not thought of him for so long. She was astonished to find herself considering him indulgently, all irritation inexplicably dissipated.

" Oliver ? "

" Yes."

Mrs. Cloud's eyebrows were expressive.

" Was he—— ? " she ventured.

Laura nodded.

" Really ! "

Mrs. Cloud had never liked Oliver, but she nevertheless felt a new respect for Laura on his account. And then, inevitably—

" Does Justin know ? "

Laura shrugged her shoulders. She was discovering, with a touch of bewilderment, how much she had changed in less than three months. For, instead of being terrified at the mere chance of Justin's knowledge, she thought that it didn't matter after all if he did, one way or another, hear a disturbing rumour or two. Of course, she would never tell him herself, but if Mrs. Cloud—— In fact, she would rather like Justin to know what Oliver had thought about her three months ago. That Oliver might have his own feelings on the subject simply did not occur to her, any more than she knew why she should like Justin to know. But she knew that she did wish it and that she was tempted to use Mrs. Cloud to accomplish her wish; also, that for some reason or other, she was feeling vaguely ashamed of herself. For it was about an upright and sensitive spirit that the Maya-veil of love had been cast. Laura would have been an honest soul if she had not been a woman. As it was she at least tried to change the subject with—

" Do you know when Rhoda and Lucy come back, Mrs. Cloud ? "

Mrs. Cloud would not be diverted.

" I cannot understand Justin," said Mrs. Cloud. Her eyes were on Laura's hand again.

Laura flushed.

" It doesn't mean anything—to a man," she said defensively, " no more than a tie-pin."

"It's so unlike Justin." Mrs. Cloud assured herself that she believed what she said.

"Oh no, Mrs. Cloud." Laura's eyes were shrewd as well as wistful. "He always forgets details. You know what he is. You see, it is a detail to him. It means just nothing." She lifted her chin. "I'm glad. I like him that way."

Mrs. Cloud was frowning, very near anger for once. And yet. . . . Oh, it was extraordinary of Justin . . . but she could not think that it was all his fault. . . . Laura had no business to encourage him. . . .

"I shall speak to Justin," she said stiffly.

Laura caught her arm with that unseemly naked hand of hers, as if Mrs. Cloud were rising on the instant.

"Oh no, Mrs. Cloud. Please! I should hate you to. I should simply hate it. I don't want it—that way. If you said anything to him—— Oh, please—you wouldn't, would you?"

"I can say what I like to my own son, Laura," said Mrs. Cloud fiercely.

"I know. I know. Of course. But——"

"But what?" said Justin's mother.

"But—I'm going to marry him," said Laura, softly, but quite desperately.

At that they were silent, their eyes in their laps. They were both hot and sore, though they could not have told why: and they both said to themselves over and over again that they must make allowances—make allowances.

Suddenly Laura put her hand on Mrs. Cloud's knee.

"Mrs. Cloud—dear Mrs. Cloud—I didn't mean—I only wanted——"

"What do you want, Laura?"

"I don't want him prompted," said Laura rather pitifully. "I want him to give it to me because he wants to give it to me. Not because it's the thing to do. I want——" She laughed. "I want too much, don't I?"

"Men look at things so differently," said Mrs. Cloud in her turn. Her anger had come and gone again like a puff of summer wind.

"Yes, I know."

"He's very fond of you, my dear," said Mrs. Cloud.

"Yes. But men—— Oh, I wish we were all women," cried Laura. "Things would be so much simpler. One could just talk them out. But you can't talk your own language to a man, can you? We're like those Indian princes at the Durbar from the north and the south, whose only common language was English. Even Justin and I talk English, I suppose, not our own languages. At least—I'd talk mine, only Justin gets bored." She laughed suddenly. "But I'm getting a smattering of his," said Laura with satisfaction, "more than he thinks. I'll—I'll surprise him some day, p'raps! *Am not I thine ass?* Wouldn't Justin jump?" Her eyes danced. She looked as wicked as a cat—no Laura of Justin's acquaintance at all.

"What's the matter with you, child?" cried Mrs. Cloud bewildered, and at that her mood changed and her face with it. She slipped down on to the floor, half sitting, half kneeling at Mrs. Cloud's feet, and began (an old privilege) to play with the loose rings on the beautiful hand with its blue raised veins and its skin like a dried petal, twisting them this way and that to make them sparkle.

"Mrs. Cloud?" began Laura at last.

"Well?"

"Mrs. Cloud?" Still Laura hesitated. "Do you think—— Is it always—two languages? When one's married a long time, is it different?"

"Oh, marriage is a new country altogether." Mrs. Cloud was smiling again. "You both get—naturalized, I suppose."

They sat in silence thinking their thoughts, till at last Laura gave a great, happy sigh.

"It will be lovely, being married to Justin," said Laura dreamily.

"It ought to be," said Mrs. Cloud.

CHAPTER XXI

I SUPPOSE that we all know summers and summers and—The Summer—the one summer into which, for whatever reason, all the forgotten others pour their glories, so that for ever it glows in our minds, an Eden of sun and strawberries and roses and a frock—that was a pretty frock!—and remembered sentences that still speak themselves in our ears in a remembered voice—a summer of immortal little things—a joke, a glance, a daisy-chain, a head turning quickly, an afternoon in the hay. The other summers are well enough, but their flowers, every primrose and poppy of them, open in their seasons and not all at once: and they are soon over. It rains for days in other summers. But in The Summer——

“Oh, no, it never rained,” Laura would tell you. “I know, because I remember. I was out of doors with Justin all day long.”

“What about meals?” You may ask her that if you like. She will only look at you pityingly.

“What did you do all day long?”

“We walked—and talked——”

“What about?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It was a lovely summer——”

Justin would agree, I think. It was The Summer for him also, the summer which justified him in calling his eggs “The Collection,” the summer when he had not minded asking Bellew down to have a look at it, the summer of lucky finds and Laura’s idea—Bellew had been very struck with Laura and her method of labelling—of collecting by counties . . . The Kent section had been practically completed that summer . . . the same summer, by the way, that he and Laura got engaged. . . .

The chill New Year found him still regretting The Summer

and suffering from his usual intellectual bilious attack; for the year began with him on St. Valentine's Day, and he could only get through the long winter evenings by over-reading himself like a literary Jack Horner home for the holidays. He grew at last so tired of himself and Brackenhurst that he began to talk, to the amazed delight of his mother, of a house-party ("and Justin, you know, has never cared for young people!") But Mrs. Cloud's joyous—

"Now, whom could we have? Your cousins in York? Rhoda and Lucy, of course. The Browns? the Jones'? the Robinsons?" made no impression. Justin, it appeared had been thinking of—Bellew, perhaps? Laura might come across for a night or two. And Oliver. He hadn't heard from Oliver for months. He ought to get Oliver down.

"Oh! Oh, very well," said Mrs. Cloud.

But Oliver (and somehow it shocked Laura) Oliver had married a wife. He wrote from Chelsea to Justin, wisely, humorously, as from age to heady youth, and could not possibly come. Justin must come up to them instead. Laura, confronted with the letter and a "What do you think of that?" wondered aloud that he did not sign it *Paterfamilias*. But wasn't it typical of Oliver? Justin, distinctly disillusioned, said—

"Was it? How?"

"Oh, well, you know, I always *did* think——"

And so she got her innings at last: was permitted to toy with Oliver, to display Oliver, to turn him round and round, to blow him as if he had been an egg, and at last, crunching him delicately between her fingers, hand the pieces to a converted Justin to toss into the waste-paper basket. It was a great relief to her.

Justin, grunting agreement through a film of smoke, and utterly unaware that he had not always agreed, opined that all the same he must look up Oliver. Would Laura come?

Laura didn't think she would.

So Justin went by himself. And as the day was foggy and his boredom, thicker than fog, upon him, he found Married Life, as he stumbled in upon it at five o'clock, sitting on the studio floor, with tea-things and firelight and a frieze of

Oliver's Italian canvases for background, a novel and attractive picture.

Married Life was kind to him and gave him a welcome, and many muffins, besides letting him smoke; yet because Married Life had definitely, though quite unobtrusively, another set of delightful manners for a pampered Oliver; because too, excellent wife as she seemed to be making Oliver, there was something in her accent and her voice, a certain obviousness in her red hair (Oliver had been more faithful to Laura than Laura guessed) and because, contradictorily, he rather enjoyed the black challenge of her glances, he found himself reflecting with a new satisfaction upon his own excellent domestic arrangements, on the browner hair and softer eyes of his own Married Life waiting for him in the quiet Brackenhurst future. He came home, less bored, but thoughtful, and, next day, spoke to his mother seriously. He said that surely a year was long enough for Laura to fuss about with a trousseau. He said he hated dilly-dallying in this way. Laura didn't seem to understand how a man felt. How much longer did she propose to spin out the engagement?

Mrs. Cloud thought he had better talk to Laura.

He did. He said to her firmly—

“Whitsuntide.”

“Why, yes, if you like, Justin,” said Laura. And he thought that she need not have taken it quite so calmly. One didn't get married every day. . . . It was a big thing. . . . But Laura didn't even look at him as she said, “Why, yes, if you like.”

He found suddenly that he had no more to say to her. He took up a book, while she sat beside him, staring into the fire and warming her hands. That was a silent afternoon.

But when Bellew's letter arrived, with no apologies, but a counter invitation to Justin, she did not fail him.

The long-projected expedition with its cameras and its ropes and its collecting boxes was to set forth that spring with or without Justin—but couldn't Justin go?

Could Justin go? Laura saw the look on his face. Foolishly, knowing he would go, she could not bear to hear him say so. She interposed swiftly, smiling at him in the way he liked—

"Oh, Justin, how jolly. You're going, aren't you? Of course you must go. It'll be the making of the collection."

He looked at her, brightening, but dubious.

"But Whitsuntide? We'd nearly fixed!"

She would not let him finish.

"What does it matter? There's heaps of time. I'll look after your mother. You'll never get such a chance again."

"No—no. That's true." He tried to speak doubtfully, but he could not help smiling at Laura. He liked Laura. He wished, but it did not occur to him to tell her that he wished, that she could come too.

"As you say," he permitted himself to be persuaded, "we can get married any time. But a chance like this——"

"Why, of course!" said Laura.

"And Whitsun would have been a rush anyway. You know we might have got the whole thing done by now if we'd only thought," he reproached himself and her. "Oh, well—next autumn—or say Christmas? Christmas is always a slack time. And now about kit——"

Together they looted Gamage's.

For the history of the next four months I refer you to Mr. and Mrs. Albert Edward Kimpton, who lived in the brick cottage, darkened with honeysuckle and wild fuchsia, where earwigs dropped friendlily on to your shoulder as you stooped your way down a step into the dark little post office to buy peppermints or ask for letters. Albert delivered the letters in the morning, but in the afternoon you bought them from Mrs. Kimpton at the price of a gossip. Albert Edward can bear witness that there was generally a picture postcard for Miss Laura, who had got into the way of meeting him at the gate, on the same day that he had to go up to the Priory with a letter—which was not every week: and Mrs. Kimpton can tell you just how often Mrs. Cloud drove up in the pony cart at three o'clock to fetch groceries, and met Miss Laura in the doorway buying her grandfather his stamps.

The months worked out, I think, though I have forgotten Mrs. Kimpton's figures, at a letter a fortnight to Mrs. Cloud and a postcard in ten days to Laura, besides the stray windfalls in the way of enclosures, generally oological, that

supplemented, though Mrs. Kimpton could not know it, Laura's parish church interiors.

They wished, Mrs. Cloud and Laura, that he could have written more regularly, but of course it was his holiday. Once there was a gap of three weeks and five days. But when the letter came it was "so chatty" as Aunt Adela said (there was never anything in Justin's letters that you could not read aloud) that it would have been churlish to remonstrate, and indeed they did not expect long letters: they merely wished sometimes to themselves, never to each other, that—that—oh, his letters were most interesting but—but—— They wanted a woman's letter, you see, and he was a masculine man. He gave them neatly written facts about scenery and the heights of cliffs, and they wanted him, himself, his thoughts—talking letters. And though they rejoiced to each other that he should be enjoying himself so much, they wanted to be missed. They wanted an enquiry or two.

Justin, opening his eyes at them, would have pointed out with perfect justice, that they told him all about themselves when they wrote in their turn. What was the use of saying "How are you?" when he knew how they were? Besides he did not pretend to be a letter-writer. He wrote whenever there was anything to tell them. That day when he and Bellow had got the photograph of the gannet's nest, and the rope had slipped, and he had nearly gone whacking into the sea three hundred feet below—why, he had written at once. That had been a near shave if they liked! Yes, he was having the time of his life. He wished it were not so nearly over. Only another fortnight. Bellow had to be in town again in June.

After that epistle, and the extremely vivid nightmare that followed it, in which Justin dangled like a spider at the end of a rope that Laura could not hold because she had got eggs in one hand and Bellow, looking exactly like Oliver Seton, was cutting off the other with a palette knife, it was not surprising that she should have a pang when, coming up to lunch at the Priory, a perturbed maid met her with—

"A telegram, Miss Laura, and the boy wanting an answer. The mistress is down the village."

"It's from Mr. Justin, I expect. I'd better open it," said Laura.

She read and re-read it with a puzzled face, and the maid watched her. Telegrams were rare in Brackenhurst.

"Where has Mrs. Cloud gone, did you say?" she asked hurriedly. "No, there's no answer. I wonder if I'd better try and find her?" She was speaking half to herself and half to the maid. "What's the time? It's nearly lunch-time, isn't it? No—no, it can wait." And then, as the maid, an old and trusted one, was leaving the room, "Mary, don't—don't tell Mrs. Cloud. I mean, I'll give her this. I'll tell her I opened it."

Left to herself she stood nervously fingering the paper form, her eyes on the clock. She wished Justin were at home. She wished it were in Justin's safe hands. How did one break things to people? . . . It would be such an awful shock. . . . Poor Mrs. Cloud! . . . She looked out of the window. No sign as yet, on the long drive, of the pony cart and poor Mrs. Cloud!

She turned back into the room and, struck by a sudden idea, knelt down and pulled at the pile of volumes whose place, since time was, had been under the what-not in the corner by the door. Out they came dustily, Bible, Nursery Rhyme-book, Hymns Ancient and Modern, and, delight of her childhood, the photograph album with the plush corners and the clasps. She opened it and turned the pages till she found the picture that she sought.

Such a bright face! . . . But for the chin, the weak chin, it might have been Justin. . . . The lips too, were fuller, but how like Justin! . . . Poor boy—poor man—and, oh, poor Mrs. Cloud! . . .

She put away the book again and as she did so heard the sound of wheels and Mrs. Cloud's voice at the threshold.

"In the morning-room? Thanks, Mary." And then, in apology, "My dear, I'm afraid I've kept you waiting."

Laura spoke breathlessly, in a sudden panic—

"Mrs. Cloud—the boy wanted an answer. I had to open it. There's been a telegram."

"Justin?" cried Mrs. Cloud instantly.

"No. No."

Then Mrs. Cloud turned white.

“Not John?”

“Yes.”

Mrs. Cloud sat down as if she had suddenly no strength. But her voice was steady as she said—“Give me the telegram,” and her hand was steady as she took it. She even said—“Thank you, my dear.” She was awful to Laura in that moment. Eager young sympathy shrank back rebuked before gentle Mrs. Cloud, sitting quietly in her chair. She dared not speak. She could only stand and wait till the silence that had come into the room like a spirit should have passed. Once indeed—it was a most piteous sound—she heard a little faint inarticulate moan, and turned quickly; but Mrs. Cloud’s face was like a stone face, and she did not stir under Laura’s anxious eyes. Yet when the maid knocked at last and entered with her “Lunch is served, ma’am,” Laura marvelled to see her rouse herself and speak—

“Mary, tell Robert I want the carriage. At once. And pack me a bag, please. I have to go up to town for two or three nights. And then she turned to Laura with even a little smile for her obvious distress. “It’s all right, my dear. Run and have your lunch.”

Laura did not want any lunch. Laura knew that Mrs. Cloud ought not to go up to town unaccompanied, and managed, timidly, to say so.

But Mrs. Cloud, scribbling an address in her notebook, paid no heed to her or to the maid who ruled her in her daily life, and drove away from their bewilderment at last, looking bowed and unfamiliar and very old—a little old woman carved in ivory.

“She’s got her black on. She hasn’t worn that cloak these ten years,” said the maid. And then, with a gasp—“Miss Laura, what is it? I—I been with her twenty years.”

Laura judged it wisest to tell her.

“It’s bad news, Mary. Mr. Justin’s brother——”

“Mr. John?”

“He died yesterday.”

CHAPTER XXII

WHEN Justin, a fortnight later, heard the story of that afternoon, he was very angry with Laura. Letting his mother go alone! In that state of trouble! Why, a child might have known better!

"She wouldn't let me, Justin! If you'd seen her! One couldn't move her. She was like iron."

"Mother! Like iron!" Justin was angry and pitiful at once. "You ought to have insisted," he said shortly, and his tone added, "I thought I could have trusted you."

She was miserable at his displeasure, although she did not resent it. She guessed that it must ease him to vent in any way his regret for his own absence; but she knew, too, that whatever he thought, she had not failed Mrs. Cloud.

"I think—— You know, I've thought, Justin," she tried to explain, "that she—she was afraid of what she might find. She didn't want any one to see—to be able to think badly of him. I believe I'd have felt that way too."

"All the same, you ought to have gone." But he spoke more gently. Laura often thought of things that had not occurred to him. Then he went off at a tangent: "Think badly! What else can one think? Do you realize that he left Mother, without a line, twenty years—and living all the time within a railway journey of her? He's my brother, and he's dead—but I can't forgive him. Never shall. The callousness! It's—it's inconceivable!"

"Why did he go—originally?"

"Some row with my father. A cheque. A beastly business. He bolted to America. But you'd think—later on—when he came back—when things had blown over—when he'd found his feet——"

"Perhaps he couldn't. Perhaps he was ashamed."

"Then Coral should have made him. Any decent woman—but what can you expect?" And he looked with deep disfavour at the girl in showy mourning sitting with Mrs. Cloud at the other end of the lawn.

For Mrs. Cloud had not returned alone. In the dingy rooms to which they had carried John Cloud when his unsteady feet had been knocked from under him by a passing car, she had found a young woman with an old face, and a little big-eyed boy at sight of whom she caught her breath, not knowing for the moment whether it were John or Justin come back to her across the years. But his name, the mother told her, between sobs and businesslike explanations of how she had found the address and what she had done about the funeral, was Timothy. She herself—she poured it all out with an utter frankness that touched Mrs. Cloud—was Coral, Johnnie's wife. Married five years ago—Timothy was three—called after Johnnie's father, Johnnie said—and things had just begun to look up—they had got a joint engagement—oh, yes, on the stage for years. She had got him his first job—and now—and now—No, he had never stirred after they brought him in.

So Mrs. Cloud, when she had seen her son and had buried him, gathered together all that he had left her and went back to her home. It was a nine-days-wonder for Brackenhurst, all eyes and ears and enquiries.

"Most charitable of poor Mrs. Cloud, most Christian—but, oh, my dear! have you *seen* the young woman? Handsome, of course—she would be. But the voice—the clothes—the style—(yes, we must call at once) unspeakable! Makes one so sorry for dear Mrs. Cloud!"

But Coral, who perhaps had not met with too much kindness in her life, revealed a gratefully truculent capacity for protecting not only herself but the mother-in-law who was good to her. Mrs. Cloud had to smile sometimes and come to the rescue with a "My dear!" that, though it checked her, never seemed to hurt Coral's feelings. Brackenhurst, retiring in confusion, marvelled how well the two hit it off: was reduced to wondering what Mr. Justin Cloud—Mr. Cloud now, I suppose—would have to say to it all when he arrived.

Mr. Cloud, as you have heard, had a good deal to say, not

to Brackenhurst or to his little worn mother, but to Laura. Justin, it may as well be admitted at once, justified Brackenhurst's worst hopes. He did not get on with his sister-in-law.

Now of all Justin's good qualities Laura most admired his broad-minded tolerance of every sin and foible of humanity that did not get on his nerves. To listen to him afterwards, when Brackenhurst had been to tea and gossip, divided her between intense admiration of his generosity and a guilty sense of her own meaner nature.

Second cups would be filling, as a rule, and cake plates emptying, and the Brackenhurst that had been invited would be discussing in detail the Brackenhurst that had not, before Justin would remember that it was tea-time and make his entrance. Laura loved his entrances. He would pause in the doorway to survey the room, his shy smile comically contradicted by his air (quite unconscious, to be sure) of well knowing that his arrival must always be an event, and, largely beaming, would await attention. That accorded, he would move forward with dignity and deliberation—he was always deliberate—and so achieve a seat. He would refuse food from any hand, which always embitters a woman; because he had come, not to enjoy himself, but to please his mother and help her with her tea-party. He did help her, too, as a son does by being a son and good-looking and too big for the room, but on the whole he was perhaps more impressive than stimulating. Conversationally he needed room to turn in and when the room was full of Brackenhurst, petticoated Brackenhurst—— You understand? He knew, at any rate, that his mother understood.

But he was quite ready to listen. He would sit back in his arm-chair, his grave attentive gaze fixed on each visitor as she spoke, not speaking himself, but, it could be felt, giving them their chance, dispassionately giving them their chance to live up to his standard.

They seldom did. But they talked, because he made them nervous, faster than ever and a little more shrilly and foolishly and indiscreetly than they would otherwise have done: and were vexed with themselves when they got home.

And Justin, looking more than ever like an intelligent

little boy at a wedding, would ponder their alarums and excursions as he made up for his tea at dinner-time, and finally break out—

“What’s Mrs. Gedge got her knife into the Mouldes for? Quite harmless, aren’t they?”

“Oh, quite.” Mrs. Cloud would hesitate. “But, of course— Oh, well, you know, chapel people—and now Robin Gedge wants to marry Annabel. It’s rather hard on the vicarage.”

“Chapel! We’re not living in the ’fifties! What’s that got to do with it?”

“No, of course—but it isn’t only that. Annabel—I must say I’m disappointed in Annabel. Oh—no real harm, but—frivolous, you know, and such a crowd of boys about her. A girl shouldn’t make herself conspicuous. Mrs. Gedge only hinted that pale blue taffeta was *not* suitable for a Mothers’ Meeting, and Annabel was quite rude, I believe.”

“And a jolly good thing too! What has it got to do with Mrs. Gedge? I do think women are the limit, you know—not you, Mother, of course! But imagine any man—imagine me dictating to Laura what she’s to wear or not to wear! And ‘chapel people’! Isn’t it petty?” He turned to his Echo, who always stayed to dinner on party days.

“I thought you didn’t like Annabel?” Echo failed him for once.

“Like? Never see the girl. Don’t want to. Can’t stand her. It’s the principle. Chapel!! It’s a free country. What right have you or I, or Mrs. Gedge for that matter, to dictate to Annabel Moulde? If people are to set up their personal prejudices as a standard for their neighbours—D’you see what I mean?”

Laura quite saw what he meant; but she had also seen the taffeta frock. She could not help sympathizing with Mrs. Gedge and saying so. Laura was always finding herself put into the position of defending some one to whom she was indifferent: it was depressing. . . . She wished she had Justin’s ready tolerance. . . .

She was so sure of this tolerance of his that she was the more distressed by his attitude to his sister-in-law. If Justin

didn't like her there must be something radically wrong with Coral, though she herself had not detected it. She couldn't help, guiltily, being fascinated by the vulgar little body. She liked her brisk self-confidence, her free humour, her fund of anecdote. She even liked the accent, elusive yet undeniable, lingering in her decisive public voice. It suited Coral. But it made Justin shudder behind his coffee-cup in what had once been the cloistral and dedicate silence of the breakfast-room. The most unfortunate part of the whole unfortunate business was that Coral liked Justin, liked him very much, and said so repeatedly to Laura, to Mrs. Cloud, and to Justin himself, particularly to Justin himself. He found it trying.

She called him 'dear' and took him for walks, and asked him to fasten her bracelets for her. She used strong scent. She got at his newspaper before he came down and told him all the news before he had time to read it for himself. He was politely conversational for the two first mornings, but by the third he was reduced to the acquiescive monosyllable which always meant, always had meant, as Mrs. Cloud or Laura could have told the woman, that he did not wish to be importuned. But Coral greeted the indication with a crow of laughter and told him that he did her good. He reminded her so of his brother. "Never saw such a likeness. It might be Johnnie himself—just like Johnnie after a night out. Grunts was all you could ever get out of Johnnie then—poor Johnnie!" And so, with the easy emotion of the profession, mopped her eyes with an imitation Brussels lace handkerchief in memory of Johnnie.

Justin looked round him with an almost passionate longing for Laura. But Laura, of course, was never at the Priory for breakfast.

Gentle Mrs. Cloud was unaccountably indifferent to Coral's glaring misdemeanours. Mrs. Cloud, with her grandson on her knee, could forgive Coral her clothes and her manners, and—which was more—her matrimonial audacity itself: could listen with a kind of sorrowful content to the semi-cockney voice telling stories, the suitable stories—Coral was no fool—of poor Johnnie. Coral had been good to Johnnie

and it had not been easy to be good to Johnnie : that appeared more clearly than Coral, so carefully no fool, could dream, or than Justin and Laura realized ; though they, too, were alert, intent on shielding Mrs. Cloud from crudities. But Mrs. Cloud listened, and learned all that she was not meant to know, and was kind to Coral, and with that strange reticence of hers never said aloud : “ But if he had written, if he had only written, to his own mother ! ” but instead, with her soft smile—

“ I am glad he had you, my dear.”

“ If I’d known——” began Coral once, and stopped herself. She intended saying that if she had known what a Mrs. Cloud could be she would have sent her husband to his home long ago. But she realized that even Mrs. Cloud would not bear the suggestion of her son returning to her by another woman’s good leave. And she had fallen in love, as every one fell in love, with quiet Mrs. Cloud.

But behold Coral now, the daughter-in-law, the wife picked up in the far country, installed at Brackenhurst and on her best behaviour ; but dying for some one to talk to !

Of course there was Laura. There was always Laura. Justin interposed Laura between himself and his sister-in-law, much as you hold an umbrella slant-wise between you and the wind.

Coral did not object. Laura interested her. Coral, who did not know the meaning of the word reserve, except in the professional sense of keeping your salary to yourself, conquered Laura’s hesitations and reticences by ignoring them. She inveigled her into bedroom conclaves and long walks and talks : and Laura, intrigued, half hostile, found herself committed to intimacy, and found it pleasant. She had no women friends. Annabel and the vicar’s daughters she did not like, and the Cloud cousins, Rhoda and Lucy, had but just come home from school. Coral could not be called a kindred spirit, but she was shrewd and sociable : beneath her fragrances Laura learned to like and respect her, and to think that in a month or two, when they got to know each other better—— But Coral cut short the rest. Coral, by the end of the week, had laid all before her as far as her own private affairs and

love affairs were concerned and was taking it for granted that Laura would respond.

And Laura, against her will and her dignity and her acute consciousness of what Justin would say if he knew, did respond. She did not know how it happened; but she found herself talking to Coral, talking about everything under the sun—and Justin. She had never discussed Justin with any one in all her life. It was a curious sensation, sacrilegious but enjoyable. She did not realize that it was Coral's doing. But Coral had not been a week at Brackenhurst before she decided that Laura was in love with Justin and needed a little help. A born matchmaker, she had resolved to give it.

"You never thought of taking on my brother-in-law, I suppose?" she said one day to Laura. And then, impressively—"I believe you could get him if you tried."

Laura looked puzzled.

"What do you mean, Coral—get him?"

"Marry him."

"But of course. We're engaged."

"Engaged?" For once Coral had no words. Laura laughed.

"Didn't you know? I thought you did. I suppose we took it for granted you knew. One does, somehow."

"But you can't be engaged." Coral was quite annoyed.

"What d'you mean—can't?" said Laura sharply. But as Coral hesitated, she added—"Oh, you mean I'm not good enough for him." She flushed. "I know that. You needn't rub it in."

Coral was genuinely shocked.

"Not good enough? What utter rot! As if I ever dreamed of such a thing! As if a woman weren't always too good for a man. It's Justin who's lucky, I should say!"

Laura put aside the grossness of that insincerity with a polite smile.

"What did you mean then, that we couldn't be engaged?"

"Only that you don't behave as if you were. When I think of me and Johnnie, let alone my best boys—goodness me!"

Laura thought that she ought to be offended; but she could not be. Coral's views were too interesting and she was too obviously unconscious that her interest could be unwelcome.

"Well, we are, anyway——"

Coral enveloped her in an embrace. She looked genuinely delighted.

"Good business, dearie! But I say, I must chaff Justin for not telling me!"

"Oh Coral, don't! You'll make him squirm. Haven't you noticed how he hates—fuss?" she ended delicately, afraid of offending Coral. But Coral did not seem disturbed.

"Yes. Aren't men quaint? I had a lot of trouble before I cured Johnnie. Justin does remind me so of Johnnie sometimes. That type needs a heap of managing. When I marry again——"

"Again?"

Coral bridled, up in arms in an instant.

"How old d'you think I am then? Sixty?"

"Oh, no! oh, no!" Laura, perplexed, tried to smooth down the angry little woman. But Coral, touched on a tender spot, was not to be pacified.

"Fifty? Forty? I tell you—I'll tell *you*—I'm thirty. That's what I am. Not a day more. And Tim was accidental. Quite. If I'd had my way—— Of course a child takes it out of you—and touring on the top! I played Aladdin at the time I was nursing him. It wasn't as easy as you'd think either. My word, how that kid used to howl! My dressing-room was star, you see—right off the stage. We used to have to arrange with the conductor for incidental music whenever he woke up. Can't trust landladies—will give 'em gin when your back's turned. Well, as I say—I may be thirty and there's Tim and the mourning; but made-up I don't look a day over twenty, I give you my word. Why shouldn't I get married again?"

Laura fidgeted, and Coral reddened anew. She had a terrible trick of accusing you of thinking that which, as a matter of inconvenient fact, you had been thinking.

"If you think I wasn't fond of poor old John—well, you're wrong. But he's dead and I'm alive. And once you've had a husband, you know——"

Laura obviously didn't.

"Well—mind, I'm not saying it's only habit—but a man's like a fur coat. Not absolutely necessary, but once you've had one you can't get on without. You feel lost. You want some one to look after. I'd never go wrong, you know. I'm not that sort. A girl who can't control herself makes me sick. I've seen too much of it. And they call it love! But give me a husband! Not that I'd live on a man even if he were my husband. I own myself, you know. I pay my way. Why—I've earned my keep ever since I was twelve. Up to six-ten a week I've been, and down to eighteen bob and provide your shoes and gloves. But I've always kept myself—and John too sometimes; though he hated it, poor Johnnie. But there it was, you see. I could play anything from *Little Eva* to *The Worst Woman in London*. But, John, he wasn't much good. He could act straight parts all right, and of course I always got him cast for earls when I knew the management; but he wasn't much use for anything else. Too much the gentleman, you know. And a joint engagement—it's cheaper one way—living together; but they beat you down. Still, it's better than living alone. It's hell, living alone——"

That was always the burden of the conversations with which she beguiled their long hours together. For Mrs. Cloud was pathetically absorbed in Timothy, and Justin had grown adroit in calculating and evading his sister-in-law's whereabouts. Laura, as Mrs. Cloud told Aunt Adela in an apologetic call, was invaluable. She got on so well with Coral. Indeed, as she said one day to her son, she was doing Coral good. Hadn't Justin noticed how much quieter poor dear Coral had grown in manner?

But neither Mrs. Cloud nor Justin noticed how much good Coral was doing Laura. For Laura, doing her duty with wide eyes and ears and mouth, drank in knowledge that had never before come her way: was introduced to facts—facts as crude and obvious as bread-and-cheese—and that, often enough, in

a fashion that would have appalled Aunt Adela and would have been incomprehensible to Mrs. Cloud.

For Coral, inevitably, sprinkled her conversation with tales of the trade, occasionally funny, invariably coarse—tales so complicatedly Rabelaisian that Laura, that seeker after knowledge, would wrinkle her brows and ask questions, and Coral would double up with laughter and sometimes explain. But the explanations were even more extraordinary than the stories. Now and then she carried a perplexity to Justin. He, in his sensible fashion, always explained the point that would have horrified Aunt Adela, and, though he laughed, agreed with her that it was not really funny. Laura was satisfied. She liked Justin. She knew where she was with Justin. He never left his sentences unfinished. She was superior one day when Coral began, as usual, to tease her.

"Oh, I understand that now. I asked Justin."

"You didn't! You haven't? Really, Laura!" For once Coral was shocked. "I never heard of such a thing! Haven't you any sense of decency? To ask a man——! I wonder you're not ashamed." And then, with a giggle. "What did he say?"

"Oh, he just told me," said Laura, puzzled at Coral's heat.

"Didn't you fall through the floor? My dear, you mustn't! I can't tell you things if you—— Oh, really, Laura, you're the limit!" Coral was divided between laughter and real annoyance.

"But I always ask Justin everything," Laura remonstrated. "Why shouldn't I? Of course I shouldn't dream of telling Aunt Adela. But Justin!"

And Coral, that typical stage mixture of frankness and prudery, was forced to realize that she was entirely and unsuspectingly sincere.

"D'you tell him anything?" she gasped.

"Well, who else can I ask? He was at Oxford, you know. He knows an awful lot."

"He must be a decent sort! My word!" Coral was impressed for once.

"He's Justin," said Laura placidly.

And Coral, the married woman, the woman of her world,

admitted to herself, with a laugh and a touch of envy, that there were things in Brackenhurst undreamed of in her philosophy, and that their names were Laura Valentine and Henry Justin Cloud. Also, with admirable wisdom, that she had much better leave them to work out their own salvation in their own amazing way.

But you don't suppose that she did? Surely the resolve was enough to stamp her an unusual woman. You cannot expect her to abide by it.

Such a fascinating pie as she had found, too, at Brackenhurst and so badly in need of a stir: and she born with the very finger for it, the crooked, enquiring, blunt-tipped finger of the artist in such cookery! And Brackenhurst, save for this godsend of a pie, was such a dull place to be resting in, though she owed Johnnie's folk the visit and it was doing Timothy good—that, with an ache at her heart, she realized. She asked herself sometimes if she should ever dare take Timothy from this, so obviously his own place. His cheeks were so rosy, and his nurse so competent, and his poor little manners so much improved that she felt at times half afraid of him—or herself. She could not see this new Timothy with her any more in lodgings and dressing-rooms and trains. And yet, how could she stay on indefinitely at the Priory? She who was homesick already for her own familiar world of bustle and bright lights, and scent, and dirt, and chocolate, and men, and overwork. Brackenhurst for a week-end was as good as a picture palace; but she had been there a month now and there was nothing in the world to do but talk to Laura.

She thanked her stars for Laura. She admired Laura, would have given her an introduction to a manager with hearty goodwill. It amused her to shock Laura, and yet Laura's wondering eyes could hurt her. She had a queer tenderness for her, as for a child: and yet she did not spare her. She told herself that it did Laura good to jump. And the relief of reckless speech was great.

"What a queer mark!" said Laura to her one day. Coral had slipped off her blouse and was trying on a half-made bodice. Laura, hovering round her with pins and scissors,

had noticed a white three-cornered scar on Coral's bare shoulder.

"That?" Coral laughed. "Johnnie did that. Poor Johnnie! How upset he was next day!"

"How did it happen?" said Laura. "It's quite a bad mark. Keep still."

"Chair-leg," said Coral, without emotion.

"What?" Laura's pins dropped from her hands. She stared at Coral with wide, incredulous eyes.

Coral looked at her with curious, amused detachment.

"Do you mean to say," she drawled, "that you didn't know what was wrong with Johnnie?"

"Oh, Coral!" Laura's great eyes were eloquent. But Coral shrugged off the idea of sympathy. She was quite genuinely matter-of-fact.

"My dear, he didn't mean it. He couldn't help it. They're not themselves, you know. They don't know what they're doing. Johnnie was like a mad bull sometimes—poor Johnnie!"

"But—but—he was a gentleman!" cried Laura, in spite of herself.

"A gentleman's just a man when he's drunk," said Coral shrewdly, "same as most other times—swears the same and smells the same."

"But a gentleman doesn't get drunk," protested Laura. "At least——"

Coral laughed.

"Well, I'm perfectly certain Justin never has."

"No, he looks as if he hadn't. I'd think more of him if he had. He looks as if he'd never been drunk in his life—or kissed either. Except you." She laughed again. "And that doesn't count. You don't count, you know." She glanced sideways at Laura as she slipped off the bodice and turned to her own work again.

In silence Laura cut and threaded and knotted a length of cotton. They were sitting at their needlework. Coral, in search of amusement, no reader, but as expert a needlewoman as ever wasted exquisite stitchery on bad material, had insisted on inspecting Laura's bottom drawer, had cried

out against the serviceable longcloths and calico buttons, and had at last, with peremptory good nature, declared that she would attend to Laura's trousseau herself. Laura must send to some pet shop of Coral's for patterns, "the best value in London, dirt cheap, you couldn't tell their lace from real!" And while Laura thanked her, but was firm against Tubbin and Spinks and coloured underclothes, Mrs. Cloud had slipped away in her mouse-like fashion (indeed, they had not known that she was with them or listening) and had come back again from a rummage of her stores to appease them with a roll of finest lawn, smelling of orris-root, and little bundles of lace from Italy. After that the trousseau increased on the filmiest of lines and apace. Sometimes, as they sat working, they even talked about the wedding-dress. But then Coral would talk about anything! . . . There was never any holding Coral. . . . A baffling woman, Coral. . . . She would chatter strange things till Laura was restless and excited, and then, with a word, a stray phrase, she would be a cold wind, bursting all the many-coloured bubbles she had blown for Laura, permitting herself some such kindly insolence as now, when she said—

"You! But you don't count, you know!"

And, as I tell you, it took Laura those long minutes to adjust her needle and thread before she answered—

"It's you who don't understand. Justin and I aren't like that. We—we don't care about that sort of thing. It's silly!"

Coral surveyed her, made up her mind about her at last.

"Poor old Laura!" she said deliberately.

Laura flushed angrily. She stared at Coral, chin lifted, with half-shut, indifferent eyes—the look that was her shield in danger.

"I don't know what you mean," said Laura icily.

"Don't you?" Coral bent placidly over her embroidery frame. In the pause her needle made tiny, explosive sounds as it popped in and out of the taut silk. She looked up at last to find that Laura had risen, was standing over her. Behind her fierceness she had a curious air of alarm.

"Well?" said Coral, with lazy amusement.

And then Laura's haughtiness melted rather pitifully into childish, bewildered anger.

"You talk so! I hate the way you talk. About us. You hint—— You're always hinting! What is it you mean? Do you think——? Do you imagine——?" She drew a difficult breath. "Oh, I think you're a perfect beast!" cried Laura fiercely.

She flamed out of the room; and, for the rest of the day, would not look at her, would not speak to her.

And Coral, who liked her, watched her with those two shrewd, bright blue eyes of hers and laughed a little and shook her head and said to herself once again—

"Poor old Laura!"

CHAPTER XXIII

“ You don’t count.”

Coral’s words, her look, her laughter—above all, her kindly, contemptuous laughter—haunted Laura.

Since the day of her engagement she had been aware, underneath her happiness, of certain inadequacies, fallings short in herself or—was it possible?—in Justin. Preposterous! She heaped scorn upon the notion till it was covered up again, and yet she knew it was there, huddled away in a corner of her mind, ready at a word to shake itself free of its trappings, to confront her, a naked living fact. “ You don’t count.” Coral’s three words were more than enough to waken it. She had failed Justin in some way? Was that what Coral meant? Coral, who knew such a lot about men. Coral, who seemed to think that Justin was no more than anybody else, thought it ought to be easy to make him like one better than birds’ eggs and books and things. She remembered how Coral had turned on her one day, laughing and angry, saying: “ You little fool, why the devil don’t you flirt with him?”

That was all very well, of course, if one were pretty enough and clever enough, a splendid, irresistible sort of person. . . . That sort of thing worked in books. . . . But Laura would like any one to tell her how she was to flirt with Justin? How to start even? . . . It seemed a hopeless business. . . . Besides—besides—she didn’t want to . . . she would just feel a fool. . . . And that was what Coral meant, she supposed by not counting. . . . Or was it? . . . When Coral laughed—oh, Coral got on her nerves! . . . She wished Coral had never come to Brackenhurst. . . . Coral and life were so mysterious. . . . She thought that being grown-up was very strange and difficult. . . .

One day as she helped Justin with his precise, delightful task of gumming labels on his latest finds, she broke out suddenly, guided by an irresistible impulse—

"Justin, I do count, don't I?" -

He was doing things with a strip of paper and a paste brush.

"Here, hold this down, will you? No, not there, that's not pasted yet—where it's curling. What were you saying?"

"You wouldn't say I didn't count, would you?" she revised it. "I do come next to your mother, don't I?" And then, quickly, "What is it—scissors?"

"No, the knife, the black handle. Yes, of course you count. What's the matter? Why not?" And then, as the subject dawned on him—"My dear child, as if one made lists of that sort of thing and marked people off!"

She laughed.

"I do. Shall I tell you my list?"

He did not answer. That was his way of rebuking vanity.

She turned from him, disheartened. So silly of her to expect to get anything out of Justin. But she was not at the door before he called to her pleasantly enough—

"I say, hold this again, will you, please? I'm all gummy."

She came back, and for half an hour sat beside him in silence, listening to his breathing, watching his intent face, helping him when she could. And as she sat thus, all he had meant to her since her childhood came overwhelmingly into her mind. She was flooded with strange thoughts.

She thought:

It must be true that I don't count. . . . There must be something lacking in me or else I could make Justin look up and want to talk to me. . . . I'm engaged to him. . . . Why can't I put my arms round his neck and say "You must do what *I* want now"? . . .

She thought again:

It is queer . . . I'm so near to Justin . . . His hand touches mine when I pass him things . . . and yet all the time we're in two different worlds. . . . He doesn't know that . . . Sometimes I think he doesn't know anything. . . .

She thought:

It hurts me to be with him, and it hurts me not to be with him . . . it hurts me more every day And yet—this pain—I wouldn't miss it. . . . It's doing things to me all day long. . . . It's making me grow. . . . I feel so

wise. . . . Justin would say "conceit" if I told him, but it isn't conceit. . . . I am awfully wise. . . . I know Justin all through. . . . He's just ordinary to Coral and everyone. He's just ordinary to himself. . . . But I see right inside—what God sees. It's like being God to love a person so.

And then this poor, triumphant, heaven-scaling humanity stumbled and lost foothold and fell back again to Mother Earth. . . . I wish—she thought wistfully—I wish he could want, sometimes, to kiss me. . . .

But at that she caught her breath in a sort of horror at herself. What had come to her? She could not understand herself any more. She felt helpless and despairing and yet filled with faint, wicked happiness. She looked across at Justin's calm profile with a childish, mad impulse of appeal. If only he had time to help her! . . . And yet, of course, she could never even tell him that she wanted help. . . . These thoughts would make Justin hate her if he knew. . . . She must not, must never think a thought she could not own to Justin. . . . She must stamp out the incomprehensible feelings that, in spite of herself, were surging over her mind, the feelings that were as beautiful as music and yet, somehow, were wicked.

All the panic-stricken summer day she struggled like a half-tamed bird to free her child's heart from the thrilling touch, the tightening grip of 'wickedness.'

She stayed late at the Priory, though she knew, guiltily, that Aunt Adela was away and Gran'papa would eat a lonely supper. But she dreaded the solitary walk home and the quiet evening and the long night of thoughts that lay before her.

She went off at last with unnecessary last words to Coral and Mrs. Cloud, and glanced back, as she went down the drive, at the friendly house with the lamplight streaming from its big bay windows and Justin's shadow on the blind of his den, as if in leaving it she left behind her, safety.

The gate clashed at her heels.

The night was soft, very quiet, neither warm nor cold. There was no star in the sky and her only guide between the vague hedges was the dim earth-shine of the chalk road, stretching out ahead of her like the silvery track of a snail. She

pulled her cloak about her, huddling into herself. Her body was warm, but the loneliness of the night had put out cold fingers and touched her throat. She could hear the little human sounds she made, of breath and movement, rippling out and being smothered in that ocean of silence.

Presently she descended into the deeper darkness of tree-thatched Wisdom Lane, where the banks were steep and a huge chestnut put a period to the run of the brambles. It was half circled by a seat that was unsightly enough in the daytime, littered with paper and orange-peel and the whirled siftings of the road—a wind's dust-pan, a perch for the birds, an urchins' parliament. But at night lovers sat there.

Laura, who had so often passed by with a smile or a shrug of cool wonder at the ways of 'poor people,' content to court in public, swerved suddenly off the path and into the road, slipping by the dark seat like a shadow. Yet she had, unwillingly, a glimpse of the couple that, since she could remember, always seemed the same, sitting as they always sat, clasped, motionless, the woman's head on the man's breast, the faces grey-white like the road beyond the shadows.

Laura, in that glance, half recognized their own maid, doubtfully, as a goodwife eyes a changeling. She knew—her common sense told her—that at ten o'clock Ellen would slip through a back door and appear five minutes later, capped and decent and respectful, with a tray and glasses in her hand, and no inexplicable glory on her common face. But at this moment, she, Laura, the mistress, was ignored: was not even seen. She knew that she might pass and repass a dozen times and they would not stir. She was inconsiderable, invisible, impalpable. She did not exist.

She went her way, humbly, filled with awe and wonder and intolerable envy. What was this transmuting force, this holy spirit that could draw a magic circle about a housemaid and a groom in which to sit out their hour in a public way, inviolate, divine? . . . What was it? . . . What did it mean? . . . What did it all mean? . . . And why should she, Laura, feel herself ignorant, shut out, and desperately lonely? . . . She was of all women fortunate. . . . She was alive. . . . She was engaged to Justin . . . But this new thing—what was

it? . . . What was it that he and she had not yet found—what gift of God that (as she saw with sudden clearness) they could in no wise find, save together? . . . Life and she herself and Justin had become, since the morning, mysterious and mutually inexplicable. . . . Why was she feeling so strangely? . . . Why had she to hurry past those enchanted yokels as one proved negligible, incomplete, a half creature? . . . Why was not Justin with her that she might carry herself as one justified, oblivious of the world as the world of her? . . .

She came out into the broad road again and again the silence of the wide fields surged in upon her, and her soul clung to her terrified, like a wrecked sailor clinging to a spar.

She should have asked Justin to come with her . . . If she had asked he would have come . . . It was only that it had not occurred to him. . . . The stubbornness that would ask nothing, that would accept nothing of him that was not spontaneous, was receiving its just reward. . . .

It was such a silence, such a loneliness of soul—so achingly intensified by her consciousness of the two behind her in the shadows, that she felt it like a leaden cope pressing her down, crushing into shapelessness the pitiful resistance of her pride. If Justin had come to her then, she could have besieged him like any wanton for the dole of a kind look, of an arm about her shaken body.

She had come to a standstill in the middle of the road because she could not bear any longer the sound of her own feet running after her: and so waited, impotently, for the passing of a fellow creature or her own mood. And presently, mercifully, the face of the night changed to her. The loneliness faded from it like a veil withdrawn, and with it the sense of isolation that had oppressed her faded too. She was gradually aware of the universal alive-ness of the still world about her. It was as if her late, bewildered thoughts had evolved some ruthless one who stood beside her, thrusting a torch into the secrets of the deep ditches and shuttered cottages and mist-veiled fields, and, with a heavy hand upon her neck, bowed her forward to peer at what the light revealed.

And she saw—saw the arcades and the galleries of the hedges and how unbelievably full they were of living, mated

things : saw the warm round nests and in each a stir of bright eyes and perking crests : saw the day-moths with their flattened wings, asleep upon blanched blackberry leaves : saw the snuggled mice in the straw stacks and hares couched in the standing corn and the friendly horses drowsing shoulder to crupper : saw tramps sheltering in the flowery chalk-pits and lovers under the stars : and beneath thatched roofs men lying, pinned down by the sleep that comes of earthy labour, and women kept awake by life awake in their bodies, and little children dreaming, and old folk at their dying, and the dead reviving eternally in the divine womb of earth.

She was held by her youth and her ignorance as in a narrow cell ; but through the bars of her imprisonment she stretched forth hands in passionate greeting to these her kith and kin. She was overwhelmed by a sense of alliance, of sisterhood ; she felt herself gathered in, embraced, merged in the endlessly faceted identity of the universe. She was burningly happy. All knowledge sang in her ears : all secrets lay bare and beautiful to her eyes. She understood all things and forgot them, and remembered them, and forgot them again, with the carelessness of illimitable possession.

Out of that timeless ecstasy she looked down upon her life lying like a sloughed snake-skin at her feet : surveyed the length of it, past, present, and future, with infinite wise amusement, thinking— Here Laura went wrong. . . . This— how foolish ! she did not do. . . . And then, with a quickening and personalization of interest—She should have told Justin—I must tell Justin. . . .

But at that, as if the word 'Justin' were the signal for the inevitable revulsion, she felt herself contracting, shuddering away again from the universal life, crying in futile anger and despair : " All this—is too big—is too big for me. This will kill me. I can't hold it. I'm not God ! " And so, with the roar in her ears of huge waters rushing into a deep and narrow channel, was back in her body again, with but one word of all the infinite wisdom that had been hers echoing in her memory—the one word 'Justin.' She found herself repeating it over and over again, unintelligently, like a lost child—" Justin. Where's Justin ? I want Justin."

And all the myriad voices of the life she had shared merged in one to answer her, to answer with laughter that was like sunlight, with laughter that was like tears, to answer her with the still small Voice Itself—

“ Find Justin then. Love Justin then. Am I not Justin also ? ”

She listened and was comforted : and going home, went to bed and slept.

CHAPTER XXIV

As a friend and as a needlewoman, Coral was indefatigable. Laura's trousseau absorbed her and she ended, with the marked approval of Mrs. Cloud and Aunt Adela, not only in converting the roll of lawn into a pile of delectable garments, but in annexing the quarter's dress-money which Laura had intended spending on a garden hat, a complete set of the poems of Mr. Alfred Noyes, and a birthday present for the twins, who, installed in a counting-house and chambers, and very much men about town, were nevertheless desperately in need, Laura dear, (if anyone wants to know, you know) of basket-chairs and summer pants.

Laura, contemplating the silk and muslin for which Coral, in conclave with Mrs. Cloud, had exchanged that elastic seven pounds ten, did not know whether to be allured or incensed.

"It's sweet of you, of course. They're delicious. But such waste, Coral! They'll go out of fashion. I'm not going to be married to-morrow!"

Coral rubbed her nose in that meditative way of hers that was disastrous to her complexion.

"How long have you been engaged?"

"Oh, about a year."

"A year! Why on earth don't you get married?"

"It's never been quite convenient. We were going to last spring, but then the chance came to join that expedition——"

Coral interrupted her.

"Laura, tell me honestly—do you *enjoy* fiddling about over birds' eggs?"

Laura flushed.

"Why, I know as much about them as Justin. He said so the other day. If he were in doubt about a bird, I believe he'd listen to me. I'm longer-sighted, you know. He would, honestly, if he hadn't made up his mind."

"Is he ever wrong?" Coral's voice was colourless.

"I've never known him wrong," said Laura in all gravity. "Only, of course, he sometimes changes his mind. And that's what always annoys me so, you know, that I never really know why he does. But I suppose when one's married——?"

"No," said Coral thoughtfully. "No. Oh, of course, after a time you'll get to know what they'll do always, but you never really know why they do it."

"That's what makes it difficult," Laura sighed.

"How—difficult?"

"Well, to keep in step, I mean. You see, he'll think Carson a sort of Cromwell for months, and I get hardened to the *Daily Mail* and read up William and Mary so as to back him against Gran'papa, and then, all of a sudden—well, he's Home Rule at present. It makes it a little difficult for me."

Coral stared, with all the indifference of her class and her type to that particular amusement of its men-folk.

"Oh, politics! I shouldn't worry about politics. As if one had time for an opinion about politics!"

Laura, with other blood in her veins, stared in her turn.

"But naturally I've an opinion! I'm not a fool! Only—" she began to laugh—"I don't let on."

"Why?" But Coral looked as if she knew.

"Well, you see," Laura warmed to her engrossing subject, "he says he thinks that every one ought to stick to their own ideas and be independent. But he always thinks (and you know, Gran'papa's just the same) that it's amazing that the people who disagree with him can be so intolerant and impervious to reason. So I always begin by disagreeing and let him argue it out. And then I see his point and he thinks how sensible I am. And if I know beforehand what he's going to say about a thing I say it quickly first. Then he nods at me, as if anyhow he were always sure of me."

"Well, of all the hypocrites——"

"It isn't. Don't you see?"

Coral looked at her kindly.

"Oh, in a way I suppose, it is—" Laura sighed. "But—but I don't believe it's wrong. You see—Justin's so straightforward. If he's in a mood—well, he's in a mood. He couldn't

suppress himself for the sake of—oh, politeness or amusing people or being pleasant. He wouldn't know how to. But, my dear, if *I* started that—being myself—it wouldn't work. Suppose I were in a depressed mood one day when Justin was cheerful and stuck to my mood instead of slipping into his? Why, he wouldn't know what was happening. He'd ask if I'd got toothache. He'd be bored to death."

Coral was looking interested.

"Considering the little fool you can be, you know something about men. Where d'you get it from, Laura?"

"Birds' eggs," said Laura with a twinkle.

"Oho! Now I see! Well, fire ahead! 'Justin would be bored.' Not that that would hurt him."

"No, but he'd go home. And if I were myself for a week he'd go home for good. I'd lose him. And then I'd die."

"You won't keep it up when you're married," said Coral, with her esoteric smile.

"I shall. Always and always and always. Every day till the last minute of my life. What does it matter? I'm happy. But it's all nonsense to say that two plants can grow in one pot. It doesn't work. They haven't room. But you can graft one on to the other as a rule. I'm grafted on to Justin. Oh, I daresay I'd have been a showier plant in a pot of my own; but it's too late to ungraft me now. I'd shrivel. I'm rooted in Justin."

Coral, demolishing that theory of life, was Jael and her hammer in one.

"That's crazy. That doesn't work. Suppose he died? What's the use of shuddering? He might. It's not common sense to get so fond of any one. It's not fair to yourself."

Laura smiled.

"You needn't worry about me."

"And—" Coral had an odd, fugitive air of resenting the happy light in Laura's eyes—"it's not fair to him."

The light faded. Laura began anxiously—

"Not fair? What do you mean—not fair?"

"Only that you'll spoil him, if you haven't already, you and Grannie between you. And I'll tell you another thing. Haven't you found out yet, you little fool, that a man doesn't

want to be loved? He wants to do that himself. He'll think all the world of you if you make him feel like loving you; but he won't say thank-you if you just love him. Don't tell me! I know men."

"Oh—men!" said Laura disdainfully.

"Well, Justin's not a cherub, is he? He's not just a face and a boa."

"I don't think," said Laura, with careful forbearance, "that perhaps you quite understand Justin. He's not quite ordinary, you know. He wants a lot of understanding."

"Oh, go along!" said Coral.

"Oh, I'm going. I'm going through the woods with Justin. We fixed it yesterday. Come too? It would do you good."

But Coral only shrugged her shoulders with an air that Laura thought ungracious. It had been an effort, though she liked her, to ask Coral to join them. But she had been struck by a certain dreariness in Coral's pose, as she moved aimlessly across the room. The room itself, as she looked at it, deepened the effect, for it was curious how Coral, in spite of the well-trained housemaids, had contrived to make her comfortable quarters appear squalid. Her windows were more than shut, they insisted that they had never been opened. Pink powder had been spilled: soiled blue ribbons, a string of pearl beads, and the switch that did not match Coral's hair by daylight, hung, entangled, from a half-shut drawer. Coral had been lying down when Laura came in, and the state of Mrs. Cloud's embroidered quilt would have moved even tolerant Mrs. Cloud. Her book and her slippers had been flung across the room and the skirt out of which she had stepped still lay, a pool of silk, upon the floor. Yet she herself remained as neat as a hair-net and tight corsets could make her. That, thought Laura, who was untidy in other fashion, was what amazed one so in Coral. She was like a trim yacht in a scummy harbour, incongruously yet indubitably anchored and at home. The spectacle distressed Laura, too young to think it right to let people be comfortable in their own way; but it distressed her still more to think of Coral sitting there moping all the afternoon. She was afraid she had talked too much—she had forgotten how near a cry it was from Justin to John. . . . Poor Coral! . .

It wasn't fair to tell of blue skies to a blind man. . . . She couldn't leave Coral to sit by herself in that pig-sty and brood. . . .

She turned back into the room.

"Look here, Coral—you've got to come out with us."

"Wouldn't Justin be pleased!" said Coral, without moving.

"Of course he would," Laura lied stoutly.

Coral winked.

It is difficult to be a Samaritan when the object of your solicitude winks at you; but Laura managed it.

"Where's your hat?" she insisted. "It'll do you good, a walk."

"I know when I'm not wanted, thank-you," said Coral, without expression. But Laura thought she understood.

"If you mean—because of us——" She blushed faintly, stumbling over her words, "There's nothing—you needn't—"

"Oh, I know *that*!" And again Coral's instant comprehension of all that Laura was not herself sure she meant, was disconcerting. "But—" she hesitated; then, rapidly, not looking at Laura, "but Johnnie's brother hasn't much use for Johnnie's wife, if you want to know—and he doesn't care who knows it."

"That's not true," Laura's head went up. How dare Coral—Coral!—criticize Justin?

"It's perfectly true." Coral eyed her steadily.

"You've no right to say such a beastly thing about him. I won't allow it."

"All right, dearie. Have it your own way. But it's true, and you know it's true, else you wouldn't be so hopping mad."

"Now listen to me, Coral," Laura tried to be calm and forbearing. "I'm not angry with you. I only want you to understand. You're unjust. You don't know how good Justin is. It's dreadful to accuse him of—of——" she hesitated. Then she tried again. "Oh, surely," she protested, "you know his little ways by now."

"Oh, I know 'em," Coral laughed.

"Yes, but you've no right to laugh like that." Then, disarmingly, "Oh, I understand, of course. But Justin—he hasn't the faintest idea that he isn't always nice to you."

He'd be horrified. He'd be hurt. Because I know he tries to be jolly to you in his own way."

"Isn't it kind of him?" said Coral.

Laura stamped.

"I won't talk to you. You're impossible. Just because he's not a man of words! You wait till you're in a hole, that's all, then you'll see."

Coral turned on her fiercely.

"Well, I am in a hole. And I have seen."

Laura stared. There were actually tears in Coral's expressionless eyes as she launched into passionate speech.

"Oh, Laura, Laura, it's such a chance! Didn't you hear him the other night, talking about Willy—Mr. Wilbraham—as if they were pals?"

"That funny little actor man? Oh, yes, he's been here often. Justin and he were at college together."

"Willy!" Coral swept on unheeding. "I couldn't believe my ears. Willy! He runs half the shows in London. Why—why—you're made if he takes you. Think of it! To get into London! To get one's chance!" She began to walk up and down the room. "I—I can't stick here, you know. Grannie knows too. I've scared Brackenhurst already. And there's the child. Don't I know what'll happen? Can't I see it happening? Do you think I don't hear you all, petting him and curing his accent, and teaching him your ways? He'll be correcting me in a year or two—my own son! Oh, I know what's good for him. Grannie and Justin will send him to school. It's his right. I shan't stand in his light. But I can't sit here and watch it. Besides, I must act. I love it. I love my job. It's meat and drink to me. And Justin comes so superior and talks at me in Johnnie's voice, talks about settling me comfortably. I don't want his damned allowance!"

"Coral, Coral!" Laura caught at the working fingers.

"And I don't want your pity either. I can run my own show. You—I don't know why I talk to you, you're such a little fool." Yet Coral let herself be pulled down on to Laura's knee. "But if you want to know, I asked him—I did ask him—if he'd give me an introduction to Wilbraham. I did ask him that. It wouldn't have cost him a farthing."

"But Justin didn't refuse?"

"Oh, he didn't refuse. But he made me feel what cheek he thought it. I don't ask him again. But oh, Laura, they've got a new show coming on at the *Fleur-de-Lys*. I've heard from a pal—a dead secret—no parts given yet. And there's one that's mine—absolutely! I know it! My chance—if I could only get hold of Willy. But you know what he is. Nobody can get near Willy without an introduction."

Laura rose with decision.

"Justin didn't understand. I'll speak to him. Of course he'll write to Mr. Wilbraham. He'll be only too glad."

Coral clutched at her.

"You darling! Oh, you darling! Laura, if you worked that for me, I'd——" She choked.

Her excitement was as pathetic as it was incomprehensible to Laura. She laughed and said——

"When ought you to go?"

"At once. Grannie won't mind. We've talked things out already, Timmy and everything. If I went up this afternoon——"

"Oh, Coral! And miss the dinner-party next week?" A dinner-party, even a dinner-party in honour of the new curate and the twins' holiday, was an event to Laura.

"My dear, I can't help it. If I'm to get the part I must be up in town at once. I'd go to my pal's for the night and get details—to know how to dress up to the part. This won't do." She plucked at her black skirt. Then anxiously, "Oh, but are you sure he'll write?"

"Don't you worry. You go and talk to Grannie."

Laura's security infected even Coral. She flung her arms about her neck again.

"You dear! You dear! You utter dear!"

Laura laughed and left her.

When she came back she was radiant.

"What did I tell you? Of course he will! I told you so! I knew he would! He said—why ever didn't you tell him? He never took it in that you really wanted it. He says he'll write to-night. What did I tell you? He says he'd better write privately to Mr. Wilbraham, instead of just giving you

a bearer note. He was perfectly sweet. I knew he would be. Now will you own you're wrong?"

Coral, in her gratitude, would have owned anything.

Laura ran on.

"Yes, and we can't go out after all, because he's just heard about that cabinet. You know—the one he ordered for the new eggs. It may arrive to-day, and he's got to superintend them carrying it up if it comes. I'm rather glad. The woods are sopping and I know I've a cold coming on. So I'll be able to see you off. Have you looked up trains? Does Mrs. Cloud approve? You will let us know at once, won't you? Justin said he'd write most floriferously. I knew he'd be nice. He didn't expect the cabinet this week. He's as excited as you are."

Laura was excited herself—pardonably triumphant. It was a solution for so much. The difficulties with Timothy—Mrs. Cloud—(Coral, though she were fond of her, had been, she could guess, a strain upon Mrs. Cloud) Justin's own discomfort—Coral's unrest—all had been dispelled by Justin. Justin might have his ways, but underneath those ways what a truly satisfactory Justin he was! She could not help rubbing it in as she drove Coral to the station. She hoped Coral was properly confounded—Coral, with her strictures and criticisms and her knowledge of men.

She said good-bye to her with relief and regret and triumph. Her cold was worse the next day, and on the next she was in bed. It was the beginning of the week before she was about again. It was the middle of the week before she found a letter on her breakfast plate.

She did not know the handwriting, but the deep lavender of the paper and the cheap ink had a familiar look, were in affinity with the lace blouses and the scent and the ear-rings to which she had grown accustomed. She did not even glance at the signature, so sure was she that the letter was from Coral.

I've got a job! Got it Tuesday, but I couldn't write before—been too rushed with clothes. I went to the Fleur-de-Lys first thing—but no go. Wouldn't look at me. Never got near any one, not even the A.S.M., let alone Willy. It can't be

helped, but I am sick—because the girl who's got it, I heard to-day, is just my type. If I could have only got at Willy! I know she can't walk across a stage even—just an elderly, academy flapper, because she was with me in a fit-up once. But she's a friend of the S.M.—'Nuff said! Well, dearie—the end of it was I got so fed up doing the rounds—Whitney asked me if I'd walk on—me! I could have slapped his face—and yet I wanted to howl—I've got all soft among you dears—and then coming out I barged bang into old Stevenson—you know I told you how Johnnie used to kick up such a fuss about him—and my dear, he's taking out a tour—Africa—a year's job at least, and possibly India and Australia afterwards, and even America. Stock. And he's offered me to share leads with Phæbe Desborough! She's a good sort—decent—I've digged with her before now and—well, I've accepted it. The money's not much, but they provide the costumes and I know most of the crowd, and Stevie and I have always been pals—in fact, I shouldn't be surprised—— Stop it, Coral!

But it's something settled anyway. That Wilbraham business did for me—I'd counted so. You never know your luck, do you? I expect Justin did what he could—but oh, if I'd only been able to see Willy!

We start Saturday—it'll be an awful scramble. I suppose you and Justin wouldn't come and see me off? Don't bring Tim. I've written to Grannie. We talked things out, you know. And I know she won't set him against me. I know that, else I'd never let her have him. But it's best for him. I'm not quite a fool. The train leaves Victoria 2.15. If Timmy misses me—but you'd better not bring him. Wish I could have got the London job. Well—it's done now. Justin will get up on his hind legs and prance, but I can't help it. Grannie won't, anyway. She'll understand. She's worth all the rest of you put together. That's why I let her have Timmy. You'll look after Timmy?

Laura hurried on to the immense Coral Cloud sprawling across the last page and smiled absently at a sudden memory of Coral expatiating on the effectiveness of her stage name: "So catchy! The Cherry-Pie Tooth-Paste people were after it once! wanted a signed photo. Only Johnnie struck—the

billy! It's quite worth while! They don't pay cash, of course, but you get their creams for nothing."

Justin had been wooden as he listened.

But her smile died away as she read the letter again. She could not understand what had happened. It had been Coral's business and Coral's alone to prove her capacity; but Justin had definitely promised to write in such a way that the interview at least, would be assured her. Justin was no tall talker. If he said he could do that much, Laura knew that he could do it. Besides, she herself had more than once met the elusive Mr. Wilbraham at the Priory . . . a nice quiet man . . . She knew that he and Justin were friends . . . Odd. . . . It was certainly odd. . . . Had the letter miscarried? Because of course—of course Justin had written. . . . There was no question of that . . .

She went puzzling up to the Priory to find that Mrs. Cloud had also received a letter, carefully written and carefully spelled—poor Coral at her grateful stilted best; but it was nearly all about Timothy. There was no mention of the *Fleur-de-Lys* or Mr. Wilbraham.

They discussed the matter with beautifully concealed uneasiness.

"Well—" Laura began, and then most cheerfully, "Oh, well—"

Mrs. Cloud drummed with her fingers.

"After all, it's her life," Laura argued.

"Yes. Yes, of course. And she writes most sensibly about Timothy."

"Oh, Coral's very sensible," said Laura eagerly. She was glad to praise Coral, to be loyal and affectionate to Coral, in atonement for the vague wrong that nobody had done Coral.

"Yes, she's a dear, good girl!" Mrs. Cloud's tone matched Laura's. "I wish—I wish she could have stayed in England—have kept in touch—" And then, "I suppose—that part——?"

"Oh, I expect there were hundreds of applicants," said Laura hastily, refusing to remember Coral's excitement—
'A dead secret—keeping it dark—you know what Willy is!'

"Most probably she wasn't suitable," said Mrs. Cloud.

"One never knows," Laura was evasive. "Is Justin in? I haven't seen him since Coral left."

Mrs. Cloud's face brightened as the sky does when a cloud has slid from the moon.

"I know. He's wanted you. He's been so busy. The new cabinet came that same afternoon."

"Oh!" said Laura slowly. "Oh—the cabinet came the same afternoon." And then—"I think I'll go up to him."

She went out of the room quietly, with none of her usual joyous flurry. Mrs. Cloud did not watch her go. Indeed they had not once met each other's eyes as they talked together.

Justin's room was full of cotton-wool, and disembowelled cupboards, and drawers piled criss-cross on each other, and a Justin so happily absorbed that Laura knew she should have laughed and blessed him and settled down to help. But she could not. Even his welcome did not warm her as she stood in the doorway and watched him.

"Here you are! Good! I nearly came round for you yesterday. Now look here—would you put——" He went into details.

She spoke through them.

"Justin—you did write that letter, didn't you?"

"But then Bellew has cases with glass tops. What letter?"

"To Mr Wilbraham. About Coral."

"Oh! No—not yet. I don't believe I have."

"Justin! And you promised Coral."

"Well—I did mean to. I'm going to. I'll write to-night."

"You needn't," said Laura without expression. "The part's filled."

"Oh, well! there'll be another soon," said Justin comfortably. "I'm sorry. I really am sorry. But what with this arriving— isn't it a beauty? You haven't half looked at it, Laura!—and getting things straight again—I simply hadn't time."

"You hadn't time!"

The contempt in her voice startled them both—stung like a whip; but she hurt herself more than she hurt him. She had not realized that it was possible to feel like that to Justin. She was frightened at herself.

But Justin was annoyed. He did not feel guilty, he felt injured. He was quite sure he hadn't had time.

"Oh, shut up, Laura!" he adjured her, and then, with gathering indignation—"Look here, you know—shut up!" and so retired into the silence that awaits apologies.

But something was wrong with Laura that day. She too was silent, with a difference in the quality of her silence that disturbed him. Where he was dignified, she was ominous. Glancing across at her he found her studying him and his occupation with an impersonal, appraising air that altered her whole face: and she had grown white, so white that he noticed it—that is to say, he thought to himself that she was looking plain that morning. But when she did speak she was outrageous—

"Justin! do you know—I think you're almost selfish."

That was the way, you see, that she talked to him when he was up to his eyes in work!

"Oh?" said Justin, bearing with her. And then, in sudden heat—"Because I forgot to write a letter!"

"Oh—you didn't forget," she said in her lowest voice.

"Oh?" said Justin again.

"You didn't forget. You just put it off and put it off, because you didn't like the bother, because you didn't like Coral."

"Well, I don't!" he flung at her. "She'd get on any one's nerves."

"Oh well, she won't bother you any more. She's going abroad. Touring."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear girl! it's her own doing. We've offered her a home and income. She need never see a theatre again."

Laura looked at him in a sort of despair.

"What's the use of saying that? Do you know what you're saying? 'Oh, Sunflower, I've such a nice cellar for you! If you'll come and live in it, you never need see the sun!'"

"You're talking absolute nonsense," said Justin austere.

"I'm not. It's you. You can no more put yourself in another person's place—— You can no more imagine how Coral feels——"

He looked at her, on that, with something of the despair with which she had looked at him.

"Look here, old girl," he began, with heavy patience, "you mayn't believe me, but honestly, if I'd had any idea you were so keen on Coral——"

"Coral? Coral? What do I care for Coral?" she asked him fiercely.

"But if you're not upset about Coral," demanded the logical sex, "what's all the row about? What's the matter with you?"

She turned away from him because she felt her lips were trembling.

"I don't know," she said weakly. "I don't know." And then—"I know I'm very unhappy."

She trailed away to the window, without a glance, without, I give you my word, a glance at the new cabinet, though it half blocked her way.

He did not know whether he should laugh or be bored by her inexplicability. He was not in the habit of translating his sensations into thoughts, but what he really wanted was that she should stop talking and be smiling and interested in his interests, and be quick about it, so that he might legitimately dispense with his quite definite discomfort. Yet if, at that moment, she could have broken down completely, letting her trouble and her anxious love for him show itself in a storm of tears, I believe that she might have won him. He would have recognized tears: he would have understood tears: he would have done anything to comfort tears. Can't you foresee his horrified distress? She might have said all her say and he would have listened. It was her chance, hers for the taking!

But she—she had learned so rigidly to repress herself in speech and still more in manner, that she found herself at such a moment not moved but frozen. She took it, with a sort of dreary triumph, as a sign that she had at last attained self-mastery, Justin's virtue—not considering that a runaway engine and an engine that has jammed are equally beyond the driver's control. And so—governed as ever by the Code, she told him that she was unhappy in the tone that she would

have told him that her new shoes were tight. Yet she never dreamed that he took her flippancy at its face value—he—Justin—whose Adamry, with the deadly injustice of pure worship, she had endowed with omniscience. If Justin did not understand it was because he did not choose: and he did not choose because her emotion offended his inexorable taste. Thus, merciless to him as he to her, she reasoned, and for the first time in her life was bitter against him for the hardness of his heart. Yet, affected as she must always be by his each unconscious change of tone, how could she fail to respond when he laughed at this good joke of hers and, without admitting that he should or should not have written to Coral, put it to her, as a woman and a collector, that it was time to change the subject.

“Unhappy? Rats! Come and help with the shelves. Coral can look after herself. Besides, of course I’ll fix up something. Only leave me alone, Laura! I’ve not done you any harm. Don’t worry so! I can look after myself, can’t I?”

She looked at him with great doubtful eyes.

He laughed impatiently.

“Don’t be such a grandmother,” he insisted. “Leave me alone!”

She gave him a smile then, a half smile as doubtful as her eyes; but she shook her head.

“I can’t,” said Laura.

“Oh, stuff!” said Justin

And then they began to discuss matters of importance.

CHAPTER XXV

LAURA had wanted Justin to come with her to see the last of Coral. She knew that Coral would expect it: she was of the class that could be genuinely moved in public. But she knew also that Justin would shiver at the idea of Coral's farewells. She wished he did not have to be considered: she wished he could laugh and say—"Oh, well, we must go through with it, I suppose," and provide himself with chocolates and roses, and endure a farewell from his sister-in-law that might or might not culminate in an embrace. She wished he would be vulgar and human and uncritical for once. She wished——

Of course he would come if she asked him. . . . It would be a nuisance, naturally, with the dinner-party in the evening, but they could go up by one train and come back by the next, or start earlier and have their lunch in town. . . . If she suggested lunch he would surely come. . . . A man hates to be hurried, but with due time allowed for the importances of life he would come? . . . He ought to come. After Coral's message he ought to come. . . . She would go up again to the Priory that very afternoon to ask him. . . .

She did. She went up to the Priory on Thursday, and again on Friday for that express purpose, but she found when she tried that she was not able to ask him. She could not get out the words. She was afraid of his acquiescence, of his bored, impatient acquiescence that was worse than a refusal. She was afraid—it gave her a shock to realize that she was actually afraid of Justin.

She took the discovery up to town with her that Saturday, setting it to the monody of the train.

"Afraid of Justin? Afraid of Justin?"

"Absurd! Absurd! Afraid of Justin?"

Coral, explicitly, and almost before they were in speaking distance, explanatively out of mourning, did not soothe her.

Coral must needs interrupt embraces, and introductions to the company, and asides to porters, and high-pitched laughter, and a rattle of news, to say—

“You’re no relation! Where’s my dear brother-in-law?”

“He was awfully sorry. He was kept at the last moment—quite unexpectedly. He sent all sorts of messages,” said Laura successfully. Then, because she was an amateur, she added the touch too much: “He was sure you’d understand.”

Coral was appreciative.

“What a liar you are! You weren’t a week ago! What’s been happening?” Then, with a scream of delight—“Don’t say—oh, my dear, don’t say you’ve had a row with him!” She tucked her arm into Laura’s and trotted her off down the platform. “Come on—come to my compartment (to myself, of course—leading lady) and tell me all about it.”

Laura, in her fright, was cruel—

“And Timothy sent messages too. Such a lot. He did so want to come.”

“You might have brought him.” Coral stared in front of her.

“But you said—you said—” began Laura, distressed. But the clang of trundled milk-cans drowned the answer. When they could hear themselves again Coral had found her compartment, and, settling herself and Laura in it, was giving her the private and professional history of every member of the company at once till the carriage doors began to slam and Laura had to jump out in a hurry.

Coral leant out of the window.

“Good-bye! You were a brick to come. Give my love to Grannie. I’ll write from Gib, tell her. And tell Justin I quite understand.”

“What?”

Coral laughed.

“Oh, the message he didn’t send, and—” she raised her voice as the train began to creak—“and the letter he didn’t write, for that matter.”

Laura ran along, level with the moving window, scarlet, voluble.

“No, no! I wanted to tell you. I forgot, talking. It was

a mistake. I ought to have reminded him. He couldn't help it. It was the eggs—the new cases—it put it all out of his head. He was awfully sorry.” She quickened her pace, panting, as the train drew away from her. But Coral's was a carrying voice.

“Take my tip, Laura—smash up his old eggs! Then you'll have some peace! Good-bye! Kiss Timmy! Good-bye! Good-bye!”

The train roared out of the station.

Laura, as she muddled her way back to her own platform and settled herself for the slow return journey, had a half smile for Coral and her characteristic farewell. She must tell Justin . . . or better not? . . . He was not likely to stand a joke about his collection . . . He wouldn't see anything funny . . . And yet there was something comical in a grown man being so absorbed . . . If he could only realize that . . . join in the joke against himself. . . . People would laugh *with* him then . . . but as it was—she winced—people who didn't understand laughed *at* him. He made himself ridiculous. . . .

She wriggled her shoulders uneasily.

“Of course,” she began, talking aloud to herself in her usual fashion, “of course it's only idiots like Coral and silly little Brackenhurst—and Gran'papa's always down on every one anyway—but they do laugh. I wonder—I suppose I couldn't tell Justin?” And then bitterly—“As if he'd listen! I don't count. Nothing counts with Justin except the collection. Queer how men get wrapped up in a toy! If I told him what they said—not that one cares a dandelion for what they say—but if I told him—— They're always saying ‘Why doesn't he get a job?’ Pure envy, of course. But he'd only shrug his shoulders. ‘They say. Let them say!’ Justin doesn't care a bit about people. Half the time he doesn't know they're there. And he walks on *all* their corns—bless him! No wonder they get annoyed. Because it *is* pure jealousy. Why shouldn't he play? He's got plenty of money. Besides,” she laughed aloud tenderly as she sat all by herself in the empty carriage and thought of him, “it's so lovable. It's like a child. He's awfully like Timothy——”

"Only a child," she was frowning again, "a child grows out of its toys. But a man—what's one to do with a man? A man's so horribly careful of his toys. What's one to do? One can't sit still and let him be laughed at. What's one to do with Justin?"

The Brackenhurst hills shrugged their tapestried shoulders as she stared at them through the jolting windows, saying to her—

"Heaven knows! We bore him and bred him, but—what is one to do?"

"One must do something, you know," she found herself arguing, "because he's not selfish. He's only self-absorbed. He only wants waking up."

"Wake him up!" clanked the train, like a live thing. "Wake him up—wake him up."

She turned fretfully in her seat.

"How can one? What can one do with Justin? How can one get at him? He's never been unhappy, or poor, or ill. He doesn't know what anything means. What's the use of being angry with him about Coral? Besides—they're all such little things. He's never done anything really wrong in his life." And then, "I only wish he had. One could talk to him, tackle him then. But if I did talk to him, what could I say? It's such little things. He's like the man with one talent. I always did think that man was in the right really: *Lo, thou hast thine own!* Justin's perfectly justified. It's I who am the fool. Why can't I leave him alone?"

She put her hand to her aching head.

"I believe—I believe I think too much about Justin. I wish I could stop thinking——"

But she could not. She was, for the first time in her life, in that mood which many women and all artists know, when the accumulated, unconscious thinking of many weeks, of many years sometimes, surges up and overflows the surface consciousness. It is in that naked hour that things—murders—masterpieces—happen. Those who know assert that it is not an experience to encourage and that when it is over you are collapsed, hysterical, and sleepless with fatigue.

But Laura, who did not in the least understand what was

happening to her, knew only with a vague discomfort that the world, the outer world, the harmonious web of sounds and shapes and colours that is the background of conscious life, had fallen apart, inexplicably and amazingly, into individual, unrelated facts. The buttons of the dusty railway cushions became important, importunate: the steeple on the sky-line, the pony's swivel ear, were each and equally a nucleus upon which her thoughts settled like swarming bees, from which they lifted again in ominous, buzzing clouds; while the trivial sounds about her, the window straps padding against the doors, the rub-a-dub of hoofs, the unlatched gate clicketing in the wind, the hum of the twins' voices in the next room, the very sigh and fall of her own breast, shaped themselves as the swing of the train had shaped itself, into words, into a whispering refrain of five words—

“Wake him up! Wake him up! Afraid? Absurd!”

“Wake him up! Wake him up! Afraid? Absurd!”

Underneath her gossip and laughter with the boys, and her altercation with Aunt Adela as to when the trap should be ready, and her necessary appreciation of Gran'papa's concomitant and rounded jest—underneath the hurry of the dressing hour and her own delicious difficulties with hair and frock, she was nevertheless aware of that refrain. In spite of herself she listened, marked time to it, fled from it into the inmost recesses of her mind and still listened to it as a sick woman listens to a fly roaming the room, or to a barrel-organ, devil-driven, in the street below.

It left her at last. It left her when she reached the Priory and found Justin glad to see her. It left her then and she forgot it at once and as utterly as if it had never been. But as she sat at table enjoying herself, enjoying the lights and the excitement, and the feel of her new dress, and the looks of the folk she loved, she felt suddenly very tired. She supposed that she wanted her dinner. She hadn't done anything special that day. . . . It was ridiculous to be so tired . . . so dead tired. . . .

CHAPTER XXVI

It was a very pleasant little dinner-party. Everybody had been cheerful and talkative, and pleased with everybody else. The new curate was as neutral as a curate should be and as Annabel Moulde would let him. Old Mr. Valentine, quoting Shakespeare and criticizing the cooking, was mellow with his hostess, and merciful to his grandchildren, and even allowed Aunt Adela, who always expanded in the presence of 'the gentlemen,' to gush and flutter unreprieved at his deafer ear.

Wilfred and James, reliable as electric switches, had been instantly illuminated by the advent of the two pretty cousins and by the end of the meal, were already in the stammering stage of a great devotion, though still uncertain at which shrine to pay their vows. James, singing *Maid of Athens* with equal feeling and flatness, for the ensnarement of Lucy, could yet cock the eye of a connoisseur upon the proprietress of Wilfred: and Wilfred, after seconding his brother with one finger in the treble and a magnificent if uncertain bass accompaniment, was yet not averse, as he cushioned himself on the congratulations of Rhoda, from twirling his mustachelets, so much more promising than those of James, in full view of his twin's enchantress. Indeed, Laura's experience, had she been attending to them, would have prophesied a set-to-partners before the evening was over, but a probable as-you-were by the end of the following day. She would have foreseen a *matinée*—two or three *matinées*—and probably a day on the river. She could have told you, for all her unworldly air, that Rhoda (Laura did not approve of Rhoda) would wear entirely unsuitable clothes, yet look so garishly attractive in them that James would be once more unsettled in his mind: and that Wilfred, the good comrade, and always the more puritan in his tastes, would be relievedly ready to

console Lucy: and that Lucy of the dove-grey frocks, and neat shoes and gloves, would be demurely ready to be consoled: and that in the small hours of Sunday she, Laura, would be roused from sound sleep to entertain pyjamas and receive confidences, bestowed, as a dog bestows the stone he wishes you to throw for him, with circlings and shyings, and coy withdrawals, with a depositing of it at your feet, and a thinking better of it, and a hasty retreat, and an elaborate pretence of wishing to be unmolested, and of not knowing anything of any stone at all.

Laura could have anticipated her brothers' every gambit to you, if she had not been occupied in discovering how different from the Justin of relaxed waistcoat and pre-historic tweeds was the Justin of evening dress and hospitable exertions, if she had not been so delightfully employed in saying how-do-you-do to his creaseless shirt-front and discreet studs and the unusually high collar that suited him better than she could have believed, and in renewing acquaintance with his deep voice and his slow sentences and his kind eyes.

Dinner-parties were rare enough for Mrs. Cloud to be similarly engaged. Somewhere near his tie (it was a badly managed affair—the hands of both women were itching to be at it) their glances met and exchanged conviction that you might scour many more dinner-tables than England held, before you found another Justin.

"He has his little faults, of course," conceded Laura's eyes.

"And I am the first to admit them," returned Mrs. Cloud's.

"Nobody ever pretended that he was perfect," Laura frowned.

"At the same time——" laughed the old eyes.

"And without partiality——" amended the young one's——

"Have *you* ever seen any one like him?" they demanded triumphantly: and Laura and Mrs. Cloud smiled at each other across the table.

Dinner was over. Sugar and cream followed the mound of strawberries from plate to plate, and Gran'papa was saying "*Doubtless——*" in the unnatural voice of one about to make a quotation, when Mrs. Cloud lifted her finger.

"Timothy!" she said resignedly and pushed back her chair.

"What about him?" Justin was at the side-board, busy with corkscrew and a bottle.

"Listen!"

There was a thin piping in the air, the merest adumbration of a sound that might have been a mouse, a creak in the woodwork, a whistle of wind, or, if one were a grandmother, a child whimpering.

"I don't hear anything," said Mr. Valentine testily. He disliked a reminder of his deafness.

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Cloud. "It's the same every night. He likes some one to sit with him——"

"Now Mother——" Justin's hand on her shoulder would not let her rise. "You stay where you are! Timothy's all right. He gets over you. He's got to learn to go to sleep by himself."

Laura agreed.

"I don't think a child is ever too young to be trained. If you once give way——"

"Exactly!" Justin nodded approval. "It's a question of discipline. Now Mother——" for Mrs. Cloud was gazing unhappily at the younger generation. "He'll soon learn to be quiet if you take no notice." He was a little impatient. It was difficult to enjoy his strawberries while his mother worried.

"Yes, really Mrs. Cloud," Laura reassured her kindly. "It's the only way."

"My dear children, he'll cry the house down." Mrs. Cloud could not be annoyed with Justin, or with Laura who appreciated Justin, but her voice was plaintive. "You don't understand. It's so bad for a child——"

"That's temper!" said Laura decisively. "Pure temper. He wants a lesson. If he were mine——" The sound of crying grew and died again as a maid opened and shut the door.

"Smack him," said Laura firmly. "A good sound smacking! There's nothing like it."

"She's quite right, Mother, you know," corroborated Justin. But, agreeing with her as he did, he yet caught himself contrasting her pretty, resolute frown with his mother's soft distress, and thinking that if he were Timothy he knew which

he should prefer. Laura was a sensible girl, of course . . . but rather hard, in this matter of a small kid? Yes, hard. . . . He didn't like a woman to be hard. . . . His mother now. . . . Yet it was surprising that his mother had not put up more of a fight for Timothy. . . . Meekly letting herself be overborne by Laura. . . . Yet behind that meekness—he glanced suspiciously across the table—yes, behind it his mother was enjoying herself . . . laughing at somebody or something He knew that quiet, delicious twinkle. . . . Now at whom or what, he wondered, was she laughing? His uncertainty spoiled the flavour of his strawberries.

Laura also found her dessert less toothsome than usual. Through the snatches of conversation she caught herself alert for the faint sound that had disturbed Mrs. Cloud. But Mrs. Cloud had apparently forgotten again.

Of course Timothy was a naughty child . . . but she did think Mrs. Cloud might after all have gone up to him . . . just for a minute. . . . She had expected her to go in spite of protests. He was not crying now. . . . All quiet. . . . She supposed he was all right? . . . She played with her strawberries. She had taken far more than she wanted. . . . The afternoon had given her a headache—the indecisive, disappointing afternoon. . . . It was a pity to waste five fine strawberries. . . . Timothy would have enjoyed them, bless his greedy little heart. . . . He was as quiet as a lamb now. . . .

“I suppose he *is* all right?” she said aloud to no-one in particular. She was unanswered: the table was all a-chatter. She pushed back her chair, shook out her skirts and picked up, unobtrusively, her plate of strawberries.

“Mrs. Cloud! I think I'll just run up and see if he's all right. D'you mind?”

A nod approved her and she slipped out of the room. The bright old eyes followed her, well-pleased.

Justin did not miss her till he had put himself to the trouble of setting up the bridge table, a collapsible affair that he had never noticed was easier to manage with Laura at his elbow to keep down the legs that were down and to hold up the legs that were up. Deserted, he found that all four legs were inclined to kick at him and make him feel undignified. He

could not help feeling annoyed with Laura, and said so to his mother.

“Where on earth has Laura got to? Aren’t we going to have any bridge?”

The twins and the pretty cousins had rioted into the billiard-room, and he regarded the emptied parlour blankly enough. He looked forward to his game of bridge, with old Mr. Valentine and his mother safely partnered, and Laura opposite himself—Laura of the intelligent questions when the round was over, accepting reproofs in a proper spirit—Laura, returner of leads and reserver of thirteenth cards—Laura, drilled out of all audacities, but so beautifully reliable, the perfect partner whom he could pride himself on having personally distilled from such raw ingredients as a dislike of being beaten and an early passion for *Happy Families*. It occasionally occurred to him to be surprised at the acquiescence of Mr. Valentine in an inferior partner, never dreaming that Laura playing bridge with Justin was a very different person from Laura playing bridge with Gran’papa or anybody else. How should Justin guess that she played her cards as a performing dog reads the alphabet, guided, for all her rapt air and business-like frown, by the innumerable hints her all-observant knowledge of him gave her. How should Justin realize that his left hand a-fiddle with his ear meant perplexity, or that the little push back in his chair, eyes on the ceiling and an imaginary fly was a sure sign to her that the game was in her hands? How should he know that his eyebrows lifted ever so faintly when he thought her reckless, and that for him to get up and knock out his pipe against the fire-place warned her against going spades when there were four aces in his hand? But Laura’s sixth or Justin-sense knew it and blessed the little tricks that helped her to give him a pleasant evening. It never occurred to her that she was cheating, and that Justin would have been horrified had he known.

But she paid the price of her ill ways. She had not studied Gran’papa as she had studied Justin, and, dutifully playing double-dummy in the long winter evenings, she contrived without effort to make him feel unnecessarily sorry for Justin.

Gran’papa, with his host and hostess and Aunt Adela

in attendance, could dispense with his grand-daughter, was mildly annoyed that Justin, fidgety fellow, must go in search of her and that Mrs. Cloud should suggest it. Mrs. Cloud had been pleasantly unable to imagine what was keeping Laura. She had gone up to Timothy, but that was half an hour ago. Justin might run up and see. Mrs. Cloud would set out the cards.

Justin found the nursery door ajar and, as he pushed it open, the thin spear of light upon the floor widened and sharpened so that he could not see beyond it. He spoke into the darkness—

“ Laura ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ I say—isn’t he asleep yet ? ”

“ Of course. Fast. Don’t talk so loudly.” Her undertones were tense with triumph.

“ Why don’t you come down then ? We’ve been waiting——”

“ Oh, I’m sorry. But he wouldn’t let me. He wouldn’t let go.” There was the daintiest little chuckle of pride in her voice and Justin felt his sense of injury melting. His eyes, accustomed to the half darkness, had found her at last, a splash of black draperies on the whiteness of the coverlet. Timothy, nominally a-bed, had forsaken his pillow for her shoulder and there lay snug, all pink curves and inadequate nightgown—one small fist tugging at her hair. A woolly beast was on her lap, and a tipped plate that had held strawberries, for the green calyxes were sliding off its rim. Her watch was on the floor, and he thought, by the ticking of it, that the lid was open. Her bracelets were on Timothy’s arm. He chuckled.

“ You’ve been having a high old time ! ”

“ I ? ” she countered blankly. “ Don’t creak so, Justin. What are you looking for ? ”

“ The slipper. Didn’t you smack him ? ”

“ You don’t understand children,” said Laura coldly. “ He was perfectly good. He only wanted managing.”

He surveyed the evidences of management with a twinkle, but he spoke sympathetically—

"I say, old girl, you'll get a stiff neck. Keep still. No, I won't wake him."

With immense caution his big hands closed over the clutching, tiny fingers, straightened them, and unwound the tangle of bright hair. Then, slipping his arm under Timothy, he lifted him, warm and relaxed as a kitten, back into the identical hollow in which he had lain before. For an egg warm from the nest he could not have been more careful.

Timothy never stirred.

Laura, smoothing back her hair, watched him in silence, thinking thoughts of her own. Then, as he turned, she held out her hands, smiling.

"Help me up—I didn't know I was so stiff. He won't wake now, will he? He was dead tired, poor little chap! I'm so sorry I forgot about the bridge—but you see—it's so bad to let them cry."

"Of course," he agreed indignantly. He too had had Timothy in his arms. "What was the matter?"

"Just frightened. That pig of a nurse had never put him a night-light. I shall tell Mrs. Cloud. It's a sin not to give a child a night-light, with bears under every chair."

"Bears! A bear would have been a comforting beast! I read *Dracula* when I was seven."

"It was hands with me," Laura was fumbling in the washstand drawer. "There was a curio, a mummy's hand, locked up in the top drawer of the wardrobe, at least somebody said so. It used to squeeze itself out and come crawling down, dropping from one drawer knob to the next, like a spider. My bed was next to the wardrobe. I used to roll myself up in the bed-clothes till I nearly choked, but even then I could feel it through the blankets pawing at my face."

"Oh, beastly!"

"If they'd only have let me have my kitten—but Auntie always took it away last thing. Here are the night-lights."

"But if you'd told——"

"One doesn't, you know. This scrap was bitterly afraid. I knew! But do you think it would tell me? Not it. We discussed *Rumpelstiltskin*; but there was a bear behind our

chair all the while and our reflections in the looking-glass, and always the dark. Got some matches ? ”

She lit the night-light and set it afloat in its saucer. The tiny flame turned the black room grey—a ghostly, friendless grey. Justin glanced thoughtfully from Timothy to the swaying shadows and back again to Timothy, a small enough sojourner in the desert of double bed. He coughed.

“ I say, Laura——”

“ Yes ? ”

“ I say, Laura—let’s give him two night-lights and damn the expense ! ”

“ All right ! ”

Her voice was casual, yet there was something flame-like about her as she followed him across the room, sheltering the lighted match with closed hands, translucently scarlet, a living lamp that lit up her delicate face and laughing, passionate eyes and the duller red of her hair. And with the same flame-like restlessness she hovered about him, enjoying, a little feverishly, her brief authority.

“ No, Justin—not there. Put it in the dark corner, by the hanging cupboard. Yes—oh, quite safe. And Justin—if you fastened the curtain back—right back—here, take my scarf—he would see at once there was nothing behind it. That’s splendid. I don’t think he’ll wake though, do you ? Let’s come away quietly.”

They tiptoed out of the room.

But before the lights of the landing Laura shrank oddly, like a bright sword slipping back into its sheath. Justin glanced at her more than once as they went down, and, the stairway being narrow, he made more room for them both by slipping his arm through hers. He was discovering that he did not like Laura to look tired.

Now their curiously impersonal alliance had never needed more than a hand-shake at rare intervals to confirm it. Such an unfamiliar gesture, unconscious as he was that it had been a caress, meant, she knew, so much from him, implied so much of intimacy and approval, that she flushed at his touch in a pang of secret delight. Yet the fear that was always upon her when she loved him most, not of him, but of untimely

divergence from his standards, of unwittingly jarring his fastidious and uncertain taste, held her, now as always, passive, denying him nothing yet not daring to respond, lest an intonation, a glance, or even the little welcoming pressure on his arm, should qualify the security of their relationship.

Yet, in spite of her quiescence and his unconsciousness, they contrived to drift past the drawing-room door, and the billiard-room door, and all the allurements of the bridge table, to agree silently to a pacing up and down of the dim terrace, with its black shadows and window-pools of light, and its hedge of larkspur and lilies, and Canterbury bells that jingled hoarsely, as Laura's skirts passing and repassing set them a-sway.

They had left time behind them in the house. The dark, quiet minutes lived and died unnoticed to the soft crunch of their feet on the dewy gravel. Justin stared abstractedly before him, and Laura, her step matching his, was filled with a sudden blessed sense of possession and forgot utterly all the doubt and oppression of the previous weeks. She felt herself, even as the plant-life about her, reviving, straightening, drawing strength from the night, and its peace was poured upon her like a precious ointment. She could even accept Justin's silence without anxiety, without the quick rummage of her brain to re-assure herself that she had amusement stored there for him should he show signs of boredom—ideas, questions, hobby-horses for his restlessness to straddle. For he was restless: through her peace she felt it stirring in him, and longed as she always did, to content it. She slackened.

"Justin—go slower. We're disturbing the night." She stood still and, half impatiently, he acquiesced.

"Isn't it big? And not a star——"

He drew a deep breath.

"What's that stuff—coming across in gusts—warm gusts?"

"Sweetbriar. There's a hedge——"

He sought awkwardly for words.

"It's—it's like a woman breathing."

She smiled up at him.

"Why not? June's here."

He was intent.

"Where?"

"Here——" Her free arm flung out vaguely. "Can't you feel her—see her?"

"Can you?"

"Yes, I can," she said, low-voiced.

"Wish I could." He paused, expectant, listening, till all the tiny myriad noises that make up silence disintegrated once more. He could hear the tinkle of the brook three fields away, and the croak of its frogs, and the dry whisper of crickets in the flowery grass. Somewhere in the valley a train roared and was gone again, brief in its passage as a shooting star, and at his ear a mosquito hummed by like an echo. The metallic strains of the village gramophone, twanging out rag-time, reached him, all silvered over by the distance, and he felt himself thrill absurdly to the thin, sweet sounds. Before him lay the grey, silent garden and the black velvet of the motionless woods, but a poplar on the lawn was faintly murmurous, like a child sighing in its sleep. Overhead the bats wheeled and glimmered with threadlike cheepings.

He was suddenly aware of his own enormous restlessness. A muscle in his throat was throbbing hotly: he felt thirsty and unhappy, and resentful of the quiet night and the quiet woman at his side who did not help him to he knew not what. He turned impatiently.

"No. There's only us! June indeed! Come on in. It's getting late. How cold your fingers are——"

From a near copse an owl hooted derisively.

CHAPTER XXVII

‘IF’ is the pivot of existence.

If Justin had stayed in the garden with Laura—if the curate had found it pleasanter to make a fourth at bridge than to flirt with Annabel Moulde—if Laura had been a year or two older and a decade or two wiser, old enough to diagnose Justin’s symptoms, wise enough to heal him at the right moment with the right word—if Justin had been scientifically interested rather than humanly annoyed by this new disturbing state of mind of his—then it would not have degenerated from significant *malaise* into mere bad temper, he would not have been rude to Aunt Adela, Annabel Moulde would not have laughed, and you, Collaborator, could have been assured your happy ending.

If Justin had stayed in the garden——

But Justin went into the house and that new-born garden-mood of his resented it, resented the lights and the voices, and the need for amenities. It shrank uncomfortably, ashamed of its own existence and, half in self-ignorance, half in self-defence, hardened, as I tell you, into temper, the harmless, unreasonable bad-temper to which men are always liable and with which women (who always know why they themselves are in a temper and how far they mean to go) have no sympathy whatever. Laura tried in vain to understand what had happened. She watched him anxiously, entirely bewildered, thinking—He’s cross. . . . Have I made him cross? . . . He was so different just now. . . . Why should he be cross? . . . And besides——

She was naïvely horrified, you see, that he should be in a temper when visitors were about. It upset her severe young notions of hospitality.

That three-handed bridge was in full swing did not improve

matters. Aunt Adela was a makeshift, but one could not turn her out. Justin cut in. Aunt Adela partnered him.

Now to Aunt Adela bridge was a game. She played it in the "Ah, if you could only see my hand!" manner, with giggles, and leading questions, and audible asides. She would regularly outbid the rest of the table and explain the ensuing *débâcle* by admitting, with modest pride, that she was afraid she had the gambling instinct. Also, she thought it showed a grasping spirit not to let her take back a card when it was obvious to everyone that she had put it down by mistake.

And while she chattered (she called Justin "Mr. Partner") Gran'papa raked in the tricks with an expression of almost religious satisfaction, and Justin's face grew so black that Mrs. Cloud glanced at him once uneasily. Her son hardly ever lost his temper, but when he did he called every one to help him look for it. Yet he was generally no more than decently morose over cards. . . . Had he and Laura bickered in the garden? . . .

"Having no hearts, Miss Adela?" Justin's voice was implacable.

Aunt Adela fluttered. Now that he mentioned it—to tell the truth—Mrs. Cloud's candied fruits were delicious, of course, and such a good idea—so much better than chocolates to have on a card-table—less thirsty—but they certainly made one's fingers just a little bit sticky and that was why, she supposed, her heart had got stuck behind another card. However, here it was—no harm done—her trump would come in nicely later on.

Justin breathed heavily.

"And the odd!" announced Gran'papa.

To make matters worse the billiard players had finished their game and had gathered round to watch and comment, though Justin, as Laura knew, hated an audience.

And then Justin revoked.

He had never done such a thing in his life! Laura knew—his mother knew—he had never done such a thing in his life! But if people would gabble and chatter—Beggar-my-Neighbour—Perfect farce—He had never done such a thing in his life! . . . He said nothing with beautiful restraint, but those

were the thoughts that you could see rippling one after another over his Adam's apple. It was an awful moment.

But even then the situation might have been saved if Aunt Adela, in the giddy delight of the revoke not being hers, had not been coy about it at the end of the round.

"Well, Mr. Partner, and what have you got to say for yourself now?" etc., etc. Upon which Justin—of course there is no excuse whatever for Justin—looked the good lady very deliberately up and down and, without answering, turned to Mr. Valentine.

Aunt Adela flushed, with that sudden change from caricature to quaintly pathetic dignity that an elderly spinster can sometimes achieve. Laura saw it. Impulsively she put out her hand (she was sitting beside him) and touched Justin's arm.

"Justin!" she breathed.

He shook it off.

"One diamond!" he defied them.

It was at that moment that she looked up to find the eyes of Annabel Moulde fixed upon her.

She stared back, insolent as Justin a moment ago, and Annabel turned away.

But Annabel had been laughing.

An hour later, in the quiet of her own room, she tried to shrug her shoulders, wisely, tolerantly, at the pin-prick—and could not.

If she had gone home, if she had been able to go home after that appeasing hour when Justin had helped her with Timothy, when they had walked together on the terrace, she knew that she should have fallen asleep happily, hopefully, though on what she based her happiness and her hope she could not have told you. But Annabel had laughed, more maliciously, more discreetly, yet as Coral might have laughed: and in a flash the old thoughts, the old bitterness, had overwhelmed her again. She inveighed against herself. Was she such a weakling that she could be moved by what outsiders chose to think? Annabel, indeed! That for Annabel! But Annabel had been laughing at Justin . . . at Justin, a grown man—making a fool of himself—over a game! . . . at Laura,

unable to stop him, without the faintest influence. . . . A trifle? Of course it was a trifle, the straw which showed so clearly to Annabel, to all the world, which way the wind blew. Such a trifle that if she spoke to Justin. . . . What was the use of speaking to Justin, of telling him what she thought? It would only mean a row. . . . He had been annoyed the other day, about the letter. . . . It wasn't her business to criticize Justin. . . . And if it were, that wasn't the way to do it. . . . Men must be humoured. . . . And after all, it wasn't difficult to humour Justin. . . .

She smiled to herself as she combed out her long hair, and, parting it carefully, put up her hands to plait it; but she got no further; for as she looked at the glass she realized suddenly, with a certain crisping of her skin, a certain shortening of her breath, that not only was she looking at herself, but that herself was looking at her. It moved as she moved, pursed lips with her, while its hand divided the rope of hair into three; yet all the while it stared at her with that air of critical comprehension that looking-glass faces have, and its thoughts, underneath its imitative obedience, shone in its eyes with such an odd suggestion of menace that she cried out to it at last, aloud—

“What is it? Oh, what is it? I'm afraid——”

Its lips, moving quickly, answered even while she spoke—

“—of yourself! Actually afraid of yourself. You're afraid to be yourself, aren't you? Justin mightn't like it.”

She watched the shamed, conscious flush rise and die again in its looking-glass face.

“I'm quite happy,” she said to it defiantly.

“Of course!” Its narrowed eyes were merciless. “Of course. It's such fun humouring Justin. It's so easy to give in. It's such a pleasure to oil the wheels—to be always exactly what he wants, where he wants, and when he wants. It's the delightfullest slavery. He owns you, doesn't he? and you're proud of it. Well, I suppose it's worth while to you. I'm told it's a most voluptuous sensation.”

She winced, her head flung up in outrage.

“I'm not like that. Never for one instant!”

But the tilted, scornful looking-glass face said only—

"Never for one instant? Are you sure?"

She had a wild gust of anger.

"It's not fair. We're going to be married. It's cruel of Justin. It doesn't happen to other people like this. It doesn't happen in books. There was Oliver—there's Robin and Annabel—— Why should we be different? Everywhere people love each other." Then, with a whimsical twist of her thought: "Well, I suppose *they're* satisfied."

"I expect they are." The face in the glass had also its mocking smile. "They're in love, you see."

"But Justin's in love——"

"Is he?" asked the looking-glass.

And as she stared into those reflected eyes she saw rising up in their depths as if they were not eyes but pools of memory, a gleam, minute and exquisite as an enamel, of green and midday blue, and a patch of black like a sloe-bush and its scanty shadow, and herself, a tiny far-away self, lying under it listening to a tiny Justin who plucked at the thyme and the golden hawksbit as he said—she heard his voice—

"Marry me—will you? Then we needn't have any upset."

For an instant the old bliss held her again.

"He hasn't grown much, has he, since then?" The looking-glass could mock her while its eyes still held the vision.

She answered sullenly—

"What does it matter? I like him this way."

"So much," it drawled, "the worse for Justin."

"Can I help that?" She struck at the table in front of her so that the brushes clattered, and a bottle of lavender tipped, and fell, and broke. And while the sweet, domestic fume of it filled the room she heard the instant, inexorable comment—

"What's the use of that? What's the use of behaving like a child?"

"Am I his keeper?" she began fiercely, but at once, with equal violence, it over-rode her—

"Aren't you? Aren't you? Haven't you made your plans?"

Her eyes fell before the completeness of its contemptuous comprehension.

Yes—she had made her plans. . . . She knew—she had always known—that she could marry him, content him, and find her own happiness in doing so. . . . She could humour him : aid and abet him in his harmless, useless enterprises : lap him in little lies and call it management. . . . The tyrannous motherliness that is in every woman leaped within her at the idea. Of course she could manage Justin. . . . They would lead happy, well-fed lives. . . . They would die at last, placidly, and be buried, and that would be the end of them ; because the spirit within them would have been stifled long ago. . . .

She nodded deliberately. Yes, she could do that. . . . She knew herself capable of it. . . . She had killed one self already—and for that, too, she supposed, she was now being punished. . . . If she had stayed on in Paris, learning, growing, acquiring the self-mastery that is Art and the art that is self-mastery, she would have come back to Brackenhurst at last, full-grown, self-possessing, of account, good enough for Justin, the right woman for Justin. . . .

But she had chosen to stultify herself. . . . She had sacrificed self-respect, common sense, common honesty sometimes, to what ? . . . Not even to Justin, only to the mean, selfish fear of losing him. . . . Not love but fear had guided her in all her dealings. . . . She had wanted him for her own, her very own : she had encouraged every tendency, every fault, that would bind him to her. . . . How unfair, how cruelly unfair, she had been to Justin ! . . . She pretended to love him—she did love him—but when had she lifted a finger to help him, to withstand him, as every human being needs to be withstood by those who love him best ? No, for she would have been afraid—weakly, selfishly afraid of his displeasure, of his lack of comprehension, of putting herself in a position that he could misconstrue. Not love—fear. If Justin had his ways, his little faults—no, she would be honest with herself—the big faults that were sapping his whole character, she, and she alone, was to blame. . . .

And yet—the unquenchable hopefulness of her temperament stirred within her like a sparrow chirping in a storm—couldn't things be put right, even now ? . . . They must get out of

their groove. . . . They must help each other, she and Justin . . . When two people loved each other—ah, but he did not love her! That was the reward of her folly. . . . He did not love her. . . . Her days rose up before her as if she were a drowning woman, as indeed, in a sense, she was, and for moments of an agony that was almost physical she clutched at this incident or that—such a look as he had once given her, such a word as he had said—and each was proved a straw. Kind he was—her friend, her ally—not her lover. . . . He had never been her lover. . . . He knew nothing of love. . . . Yet he was so ignorant, so pitifully ignorant, that he intended to marry her, to live his life with her and his children, and his comforts, and his collections: and he would never know, not even dimly in a dream, that something had died within him unborn. . . .

“My fault,” she whispered to herself. “I didn’t know. I wouldn’t see. He’s clogged. It’s getting worse and worse. He’s like the deaf adder that stoppeth up her ears. And yet he’s still Justin inside. I’ll never believe he’s not big really. And if I marry him——”

What right had she to marry him? If he were a fool—oh, she cried writhing—a most blind and bitter fool—was she to build her selfish happiness upon his blindness and his loss?

She turned on herself again—

“It’s my fault. It was my chance. He was given to me. I’m the unprofitable servant, *and from him shall be taken away*——It has been taken away. He doesn’t love me. I haven’t been able to teach him. I didn’t know I had to. I thought—I thought he must too, when I loved him so. I’ve been blinder than Justin. I’ve been a wicked fool.”

“But to break with Justin—what good would it do? He wouldn’t care. I don’t count. It wouldn’t even be a shock.”

She fingered the fringe of the table-cover as she glanced up at the looking-glass, furtively.

“And it’s a shock he wants—a shock—— He wants tearing up—by the roots——” Then her voice rose. “Ah, but I can’t hurt him,” she cried defiantly. “I can’t. You can’t make me.”

The eyes in the glass were alive with passion.

"If it isn't you it'll be some one else—some beast of a woman who won't care how she hurts him. It's got to be you."

At that she sprang up from the table to escape the intolerable domination. But everywhere there were looking-glasses. She turned panic-stricken from herself a yard away from her in the long wardrobe, to the mantelpiece reflecting Dresden figures and herself, and, caught from the wardrobe, herself again, and again, and yet again, in an unending reduplication of gay dressing-gown and ashy face. For she might turn where she would, she might crush out the candle-flames, and, flung down upon her bed, cover her eyes with her hair and her desperate, scorched hands; but she could not escape from herself, from the inquisition of her own awakened soul.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN the half light of the third hour she rose, freshened her eyes with cold water and crept out of the creaky house into the grey midsummer world.

The birds were half awake, chirruping, as it seemed in that stillness, loud and shrill, tuning up for the concert that was to come; but the trees had still their motionless carved night-look, and the hedges and fields were as fast as if the thick film of dew spread over them were a visible spell.

In spite of the burning season the air was cold, with the dank cold of the smallest hours, when virtue goes out of beast and man alike, in sleep that is half at one with its exemplar death.

Laura, fever-driven, trailing through the dust-white grass that edged the high-road, wrenching as she went, with a sort of aimless cruelty, at the dripping tansy heads and trails of dewberries, felt the flying water-drops soak through her thin sleeves and spray up on to her face, and shivered and burned again, and had no good of them. Yet the riot within her was dying out: her mood was as desolate as the hour. She had ceased fighting. She acknowledged her duty: was set (and therein lay her fever) upon doing it. She had only come out because in the open she could breathe more easily, think more clearly, and because . . . because . . . (here, if she had been speaking aloud, would have come the high note) because she could not bear her bedroom any longer. But it was not because she doubted, was questioning her duty. That was settled. That—she would not think of it—but *that* she had settled, with herself, last night. But that inexorable self had left to her own decision (because she knew him so well—so well) how best to hurt Justin—to hurt him.

And so—let us sit down, oh, my thoughts, not masters

any more, but weary servants of my will, and discover how best we may hurt Justin. . . . Because it is to do him good—to wake him up. That is settled, though. . . . No need to go into that. . . . Some need though—if only to satisfy rebellious thoughts! You do not ask a woman to tear her heart out of her body for honour or justice or repentance' sake—but if it be for Justin? Let us find out quickly, before we grow selfish again, what will hurt our Justin. . . . Not a little thing. . . . A big thing. . . . A big thing to him. . . . A thing he will never forget—or forgive. . . .

From the bend of the road a pitter-pat and clatter of wheels warned her that the market carts would be passing, and at the next gate she turned aside into the fields that fringed the Priory woods.

She wandered through the sleeping corn, following the footways, and so came at last to the familiar unregarded notice boards and the high tarred gate, and the hurdles that held back the trees as a rope checks the straining populace at a procession. And as there the children will be always slipping under it and out into the cleared way, so ever and again there were patches of polled hazel and seedling oak and yard-high bracken running out into the no-man's-land between the hedgerow and the plough.

The place was thick with ghostly summer flowers—mallow, scarcely visible, foxglove and corncockle and knapweed, bled of their hearty crimsons by the vampire night, and all the little pink and yellow field flowers, dim white as the huge empty sky yawning over them.

She stood a moment uncertainly by the padlocked gate, and then, with a vague gesture, waded through the strip of bracken and, sitting down, let herself sink backward into the deeps of the hedge. The foxgloves and the sorrel swayed and shook above her and she pulled them down to her for their freshness' sake, and let them spring free again, and then lay back once more, her lips besmeared with dew and pollen, her hands clasped under her head, and watched the mists, not rising from the earth but thinning and vanishing where they lay, and the grey surface of the corn warming to bronze-tipped green, and the dawn-light spreading like a smile across the

sky, and had no answering smile for it, but turned where she lay, stopping her ears against the riot of the birds, hiding her face from the sun, and at last falling, for very weariness, into a cramped, uneasy drowse.

It was roaring day without a dew-drop left in the open when she woke. She lay a moment confused. Vague thrills ran like ants up and down her body and soul, and her stupor thinned and vanished like the night mists two hours before. She had sunk through the yielding green stuff and her body had pressed so heavily against the damp, stony earth that she felt as if she were clamped to it. Her first movement set her shivering with pain and cold. Yet her linen frock was bone dry where the sunshine had beaten down on it, shiny and hot to the touch. Fern-flies rose buzzing from it as she moved stiffly in her place.

The footsteps—she realized that the sound of footsteps had awakened her—drew nearer. A labourer going to work? She pulled a fan of bracken across her face. Her frock was green and the brishwood high: it would be mere ill-luck if she were seen. When he had passed she would get up and go home, out of the glare. One could not think in the glare, and she had come out to think . . . to think about Justin . . . to plan—what was the plan? . . .

She put her cold hand to her head, and then dropped it again, stiffening where she lay. She knew that step, that whistle. Yet what should Justin do here? Unless—unless—could he, too, have had his sleepless night? . . .

He had stopped a dozen yards away from her. Through the bracken stalks she could see his arrested pose, his lifted head. He was shading his eyes with his hand, listening and staring about him.

With the instant, all-adapting egoism of the lover, she arrived at the only explanation. Something had happened. . . . Some word of hers had taken root, had flowered in the night. . . . He wanted her. . . . He had come to find her . . . Things were going to be all right. . . . Why not? Why not? . . .

In another moment she would have been on her feet, calling to him: "I'm here. I'll get it for you. What is it you

want?" But before she could scramble to her feet he had nodded to himself, and walked on again, and she watched him climb the gate and disappear among the trees.

What a fool she was. . . . He had been listening to a bird in the wood. . . . He was out nesting. . . . He had said only yesterday that he wanted more blackcap eggs. . . . She jerked herself to her knees and listened. She could hear him moving in the undergrowth and the serene outpouring change to short-sharp cheepings, to the agonized danger note.

He was in luck. . . .

"Krek! Krek! Krek-krek!"

She wished he wouldn't. It was beastly. . . .

With sudden decision she rose to her feet and moved noiselessly and hurriedly down the path. She would get away while she could. . . . He might be strolling back at any moment with the warm eggs in his hand. . . . There would be the blow-pipe and the mess of yolk to follow. . . . And he would go home at last looking perfectly satisfied. . . . Why not? Didn't he care more for his wretched eggs than for anything on God's earth? Of course! And that was why Coral had said——

Here for an instant her mind stood rigid for the old order. Then her thoughts, like waters when the dam breaks, overwhelmed it, came rushing and tumbling over each other, sweeping away the last remnants of opposition.

And that was why—and that was why she was going up to the Priory that very morning—up to his den—to smash up his old eggs! That would wake him up! Smash up his old eggs—that would wake him up! That would wake him up! . . .

CHAPTER XXIX

WE grow. We acquire. Do we change?

We talk of the formation of character, as if character were not already triumphant in the infant that defies its father and seduces its grandmother months before it can speak. We talk of character—but do we not mean habit? Daily, weekly, yearly, we add to our habits, literally our habits, our garments, the Joseph-coats of manner and custom, of tolerance and caution and indifference, in which we clothe and conceal ourselves, our unchanging, unchangeable selves, old as age, young as youth, sexless, amoral, unconvinced by human logic, unbound by human laws.

And for years we—I, with a hole in my stocking, and you, Collaborator, incapable of any such thing, and Martha in the kitchen, and the Kaiser at Potsdam, train up ourselves in the way we should go and criticize our neighbours' departure therefrom without a thought for our sleeping partner, biding his time within us. But when his time comes, in emergency, in crisis, then, as sure as you sit there knitting, Collaborator, that original self wakes up, with a rending of garments, and takes charge. But, when the occasion is over and it has sunk to sleep again, it is we—our bewildered, protesting surface selves who have to take the consequences. That explains, I imagine, why it is always the most unlikely people who behave in the most incongruous way, and why John Smith (condemn him or admire him as we may) remains the last person we should have expected to murder his great-uncle or marry the princess, or why Laura Valentine, who loved Justin more deeply than even his mother did (I cannot put it higher) and had a fine sense of humour of her own, should yet be setting out at ten o'clock of the morning of the last Sunday in June, convinced that by the smashing of his birds' eggs she would

save his soul alive, and that there was nothing ridiculous in the situation.

As she walked she argued it out with him, the old imaginary Justin, in the old childish way. It was long since she had had him at her side. Her common sense had recognized the danger of such make-believe, the folly of using her mind as a mere play-house in which her thoughts were actors, rehearsing each coming event with such richness of setting, such significance of detail, such completeness of result, that, in comparison, the reality must always disappoint her. She had conquered, she believed that she had at last conquered the tendency, and prided herself a little on the effort; for it had been surprisingly difficult. Laura, arm-in-arm with Nemesis, did not for one instant recognize her companion, did not guess that the old creative instinct that she had so conscientiously scotched a year before was not, was never killed, that if growth were denied it in one art it would be bound to appear in another, and again and again denied its body, would find a ghost-life in her very dreams. Dear Laura was merely pleased with herself because, as Justin would have wished her to do, she had put an end to childish things, such as telling herself stories when she went to bed, deciding the colour of her eldest grandson's eyes, and talking to Justin when he was not there.

But, as I say, she had reckoned without her sleeping partner. On that June morning she walked the long mile between Green Gates and the Priory, unregenerate, a recusant, lips moving, eyes eloquent, rehearsing an ordeal, haranguing Justin.

He would be angry—violently angry. She conceived her act, envisaged its consequences, nor lost her head when the explosion came. She was face to face with the anger of Justin and was able to ignore it. She argued: she overbore him: for once she let herself go. She had no need to stumble for words: the stinging phrases jostled for precedence upon her lips. She ranged her charges, calling this and that incident in witness: held up to ridicule his lethargy, his complacency, his lack of purpose. Her passion rose, she convinced herself anew, as she sorted her sentences, flung her taunts.

She told him that his collection typified his attitude to

life and, therefore, though it had been priceless, irreplaceable, instead of the trumpery it was, she would have destroyed it just the same. He asked her how she dared stand there—? (Justin's few contributions to the discussion strike one as having a distinctly feminine flavour) how she dared—and she told him that she dared anything where he was concerned; that she knew what she was doing, what she was risking, what she was losing; but that he should not make himself a laughing-stock if she could help it; that if he could not see that he was making himself a laughing-stock, she did—she did!

She was furiously rude to him; she——

She began all over again.

They sat that time. There was no striding about the room and hammering of fists upon the table; rather a statement of fact, an icy exchange of view. There was cut and thrust and cut again, and to her sore, secret triumph a Justin awake at last, revealing strength, subtlety, decision, justifying her unconsciously in every estranging phrase. But human nature turned from such triumph.

She began again, weakly, sparing herself.

A miracle happened. She talked to him and he understood. He was kind. He was fine. He forgave her. He laughed at her and said she mattered more to him than a million birds' eggs. And so they talked things out, friends still, watching their good future rise amid those scattered, foolish shells.

She began again and broke off, and began again and yet again.

She was still defying and defending and accusing and convincing him when she reached the Priory's open door, and, noiseless and unseen, slipped up the stairs and along the panelled corridor to Justin's room.

It was empty. He had asked her to meet him there at noon and it was barely eleven o'clock. She had plenty of time.

She began her invariable little tour of inspection. He had left his slippers as usual, toe to heel, in the middle of the floor: and the ash-tray stank. She knocked it out against the window-sill and the wind caught the ashes and dusted them back in her face. She had to trim herself in the fireplace tiles—there was no looking-glass—before she put back

the tray and ranged the pipes in the rack and shook up the squashed cushions of Justin's chair—all this with a grim little smile. She loved his hopeless ways.

But the table was neat, set out with that extreme care which is the effect of a hobby on the untidiest of men. The books of reference were stacked in two piles, one for him and one for her. He had paste and photographs and scissors, and on the floor beside his chair an empty drawer and a roll of cotton-wool. She had pen and ink, and his beautifully bound private catalogue with the thick, lined paper and blank interleaves for illustrations. Between them was the cardboard box with the eggs they had not as yet classified and put away.

She thought—— He's enjoyed himself getting things ready! . . .

She drew the box towards her and stirred her hand round among the eggs; then, lifting a handful, poured them idly from one palm to the other. They rattled faintly like a woman's high heels tapping along the pavement.

She weighed them up and down. They were as light—as light as love. . . . Deliberately she let them shower through her fingers on to the floor. But the carpet was thick and they took no harm.

Then, as if in spite of herself, she put out her foot and crushed them where they lay.

She stood a moment, slurring her shoe to and fro, mechanically, to free it from the crumbs of shell, and then turned to the cabinet between the window and the door. That came next. . . . If you began a job, you must finish it. . . .

She pulled open the doors one by one, sliding out the glass, and ran her hand from hollow to hollow in the cotton-wool. A pressure was enough for the smooth, frail eggs of the finches and the tits. They crumpled like hare-bells. For the bigger specimens she had to use both hands. They would not break unless she held them sideways, and then they cracked sharply, scratching her palms.

The business was soon done. She left the cabinet open and awry, and sat down in the window-seat.

After a pause she discovered that she was breathing again. But before her mind had time to consider that phenomenon

it was distracted by another. There was a sound, immense, insistent—sound of an earth rhythmically convulsed—sound as of an army, an army with banners, marching upon her to the eternal, infernal repetition of the drums, drawing nearer, entering definitely into her, and resolving itself at last into the throb of her own pulses, into the beating of her own heart, obsessed by the guilty, idiotic terror of nightmare itself.

‘Nightmare!’ The recognition of the word, of the state, brought relief. ‘Nightmare!’ . . .

“Justin—I have broken——” That was the sort of thing one did in nightmare, just before one woke. . . . But one always woke. . . . She herself would be waking in a moment with a gasp of relief. . . . “Not true! I never did it! A dream!” And she would open her eyes and see the blessed sunshine filtering through the blinds, and hear the birds bickering in the roses, and so turn on her pillow and drowse till breakfast time. Not true! Thank God that even in nightmare one always knew that it was not true, although one were looking at Justin’s cabinet and the door stood wide. . . . If Justin came in . . . at any moment he might come . . . he would wonder why . . . he would discover . . .

In an instant she was across the room, thrusting back the long drawers one after another with hands that shook. Her haste made her clumsy. The wood stuck and squeaked and the handles jingled so loudly that it was impossible that Justin should not hear them out in the woods and come quickly and catch her in the act.

She managed them at last, closed the doors and turned the key and stood leaning against them, breathing quickly as though she had been running.

At least it would give her a pause, a moment’s pause before discovery, in which to—wake up. She tried to laugh. The collection was all right really—quite all right. . . . That was why there was really no use in waiting for Justin. . . . What if she went away quietly, at once, on tiptoe? . . . Nobody had seen her come. . . . Nobody would ever guess that she had touched anything. . . . She was the last person who would be suspected. . . . The cat . . . a careless maid . . . some one who owed Justin a grudge. . . . There would

be talk and marvelling. . . . Justin would rage. . . . But they would never find out. . . .

Besides, it was only nightmare. . . . She would have waked before they suspected. . . .

What was that? That creaking stair? Justin? Not Justin? . . . Her feet had already carried her to the door, but at that sound she slipped back into her chair, white, speechless, waiting. But it was only the maid, restoring a waste-paper basket.

She was instantly Miss Valentine, controlled, smiling.

"Thank you, Mary. Oh, Mary, is Mr. Justin in?"

The maid thought so, Miss—had seen him crossing the lawn just now: and so departed, shutting the door, fastening the cage, upon a trapped creature. No escape now! . . . The maid had seen her, sitting in Justin's room. . . . No chance of an alibi. . . . Besides, Justin might come up at any moment now. . . .

She sat a long while, waiting for him to come.

She was asked once—how long? an hour? half an hour? ten minutes? She said painfully—She didn't know. A long while.

But if you consider that Justin had appointed twelve o'clock, that he was a punctual man, and that he came in at last mopping his forehead and complaining of the noon heat, it cannot have been long. Half an hour, perhaps? Yet she had sat so still that when he came her cramped limbs at first refused to stir, and she stayed where she was, helplessly, staring at him, till he, missing the greeting and the bustle that was his due, turned to her with a vague notion that something must be wrong.

"Why, Laura, what's up?" And then, "My dear girl, you do look white! But this heat's enough to knock up any one." And so disposed of his concern and turned to his prepared table, while she sought for an answer and found none upon her lips save the forgotten, petulant retort of her childhood.

"I'm—not—your dear girl!"

But there was neither petulance nor childishness in her voice as she said it, rather an intonation of such hopelessness,

such despair, that Justin must have guessed at worse trouble than the heat, had he not been talking too fast on his own account to catch a word.

"Now then—let's get to work. But the eggs? Where's the box of eggs? Why, Laura, you've cleared away the eggs! Did you sort them? I never told you to. Did you put them in the cabinet?"

She shook her head.

"Where then?"

Still she did not speak. She was making the discovery that she had lost control of her voice, of the muscles of her throat. She swallowed once or twice. She said, her will said, two and three and four times, "They are broken. I broke them," but she made no sound at all. The sensation was a horrible one. It confirmed, with its physical reality, the paralysis of her spirit.

Justin, watching her, guessed distortedly at the truth.

"There's been an accident?"

You could not say that she shook her head, but she moved it stiffly, once, a very little.

"Laura? Not smashed?" His face was tragic. "Not smashed, Laura? How many? Which ones? Not the whole lot?"

Again she opened and shut her mouth.

He was at the cabinet.

"Where's the key? What have you done with the key?" And then, with palpable effort—"Don't be scared, Laura. I know you couldn't help it. But what happened?"

His generosity cut like a knife. As suddenly as it had descended upon her the dumbness passed away. Her tongue was loosened. She heard her voice, her high, shaking voice, entirely independent of her, yet still her own voice—

"I did it," said Laura's voice, "I—I did it on purpose."

"What?" He wheeled, staring, while within her mind she implored this voice of hers to go on, to tell Justin, to make Justin understand. And at last it did say—

"I had to, Justin. Justin—I had to."

He took a step towards her. There was a new and dangerous light in his eyes.

"Are you mad? What do you mean? Are you quite mad?"

She considered.

"I had to." Her voice was growing easier to manage.

"Will you tell me why?"

Her moment was come. Now she must loose her lightnings, launch her thunderbolts, harangue, arraign, convince, convict him, overwhelming him with unanswerable truths. She must take the chance that had come to her. Whitening, she drew breath and spoke—

"I—I had to," said Laura.

"Where—?" he began; then his eyes, following hers, caught sight of the mess of shell that littered the floor and he lost control. He was flushed, darkly, like a drinker. The natural man emerged in a quick, furious staccato of unintelligible words. A wave of terrified laughter swept over her as she listened.

So that's swearing. . . . So he can swear, Coral! You see, he can. . . . And then—— It's like a cat—like a tom-cat! It's comical! It's horrible! It makes one sick! Stop! Oh, Justin, stop! . . . She was clutching at the arms of her chair.

But it was all over in an instant. Before she realized what was happening she found him towering over her, the Justin of a nightmare, huge and hazy, with glittering eyes.

He was speaking to her. .

"Will you go away, please?"

"Justin!" she implored him.

"Will you go away, please?"

She resisted, roused at last, eloquent at last, fighting desperately—

"Justin! I must tell you—— Justin! Wait! Listen! Just a minute—— Justin!"

But he took her lightly by the arm, and in a moment she was in the passage, and he had shut the door against her.

She went shaking and stumbling down the staircase and out into the sunshine.

CHAPTER XXX

It seems to be a fact that love, like the camel, can live on its own resources for a length of time that amazes the less fantastic and incalculable rest of creation; but it is equally certain and a great deal more comprehensible that months of strain, followed by a spell of hot weather, salad and strawberries, nervous excitement, sleepless nights and a climax of elemental emotion, have sooner or later to be paid for; that, soothing as it may be to the soul to lie for three hours in a damp ditch without changing afterwards, it is distinctly bad for the body; and finally, that only a lover or a camel (there is certainly a likeness between them in more ways than one) could be surprised if at last even their strength goes from them, and they give their relations or their driver a deal of unnecessary trouble.

Laura, developing, for no reason that Aunt Adela could conceive, a feverish cold, dragged about the house for a week, refusing to go beyond the garden, saying how much better she would be in a day or two, and then collapsed. Once in bed she found herself suddenly too weak and ill to struggle with the kindly, overbearing Samsons who kept her there, and by the end of the day the very knowledge of them had passed, swamped, with the memory of the past and the fear of the future, in the present mercy of bodily pain.

From that timeless interval she woke one day to the realization of a darkened room and a clock ticking, and a calendar on the wall with 'twenty-five' in staring, black figures and July above it, and below a verse, and below that again a table with bottles and a cup. She recognized them at once—bottles and a cup and a table and a calendar, a calendar and a table——Why had somebody said something just now about Laura being delirious? . . . Poor Laura! . . . saying cruel

things like that about poor Laura. . . . She was sorry for that poor girl. . . .

And here she began to laugh aloud, weakly, because she was Laura herself, lying on her own bed, able to move and speak, though the bedclothes were a weight unbearable and there was a weight like bedclothes on her mind.

She looked up at an aunt appearing miraculously out of space.

"I'm Laura!" she told her.

"Of course you are. Now be a good girl and go to sleep."

"Poor Laura," she said—and obeyed.

After that she began to mend, yet so slowly that the doctor was puzzled. Day ate up day and still she lay passive, taking her medicines, doing as she was told, without wishes, almost without words, but listening with grave, uncomprehending attention to Aunt Adela, under orders to amuse, to rouse if she could, but not to excite the invalid. Aunt Adela, in undisputed command of Laura and the situation, now that the nurse was gone, enjoyed herself. She was conscientious, she was well-meaning: she sat by the hour at Laura's bedside in a basket chair that creaked as she turned the pages, reading her items of interest from the paper (nothing exciting, of course—oh, the doctor might depend on her) and stories and poems from the parish magazine: and would break off in the middle with chit-chat of the village, with the news that the new curate had preached last Sunday, and that Annabel Moulde had called to enquire after Laura. But every one enquired regularly—most kind—because, of course, it was an extraordinary thing to get pneumonia in such weather, and, as she had told Annabel only that morning, she hoped it would be a warning to her never to be without wool next her skin, even in the height of summer. Mrs. Cloud had said the same thing. Yes, she had called before she went to the sea—oh, about a month ago now, Justin had gone on ahead, if Laura remembered—but Laura was looking so white that she was sure it was time for her tonic, and how often had she told Laura that she must try and not talk so much?

Laura thought feebly how kind she was, and how like the bluebottle buzzing on the pane.

But as July blazed over into August, Laura noticed, with the same trance-like impersonal interest in the phenomenon, that Aunt Adela's manner was changing. She looked worried, yet greatly excited. She could not be talking ten minutes without pulling herself up short. She was always changing the subject for no reason that Laura could discern, for ever verging on tremendous revelations and for ever thinking better of it. She talked more than usual, too, of the twins and of how young they were, thank God—no, Laura, not eighteen, seventeen and nine months—and of the need for a good supply of tinned foods in the house, and of how much she had always admired Sir Edward Grey.

Laura, promising not to excite herself by talking to Ellen, when Ellen, obviously also under orders, dusted the room, did not even shrug a shoulder. Aunt Adela had always loved making a mystery. She was not curious. She had her own mystery to occupy her, the mystery of the dead weight upon her mind that was connected with the names that were for ever on Aunt Adela's tongue—Justin—Mrs. Cloud—familiar names that hurt her to hear spoken. It was not that she had really forgotten things, of course . . . but for the moment, only for the moment, the precise significance of certain far-away actions of her own had evaded her, as well as the exact relation to herself of this Justin. . . . Justin—and Mrs. Cloud—who was—who, of course, was Justin's mother. . . . Now Justin—now she and Justin. . . . But it hurt her head to remember all that she knew about Justin.

But one morning Aunt Adela, called out of the room to entertain callers—morning calls had never quite gone out of fashion in Brackenhurst—left the paper she was reading flung down upon the bed, and Laura's eye was caught by such enormous headlines as she had never seen before, headlines that blared through the room like trumpets. England—she turned sideways that the paper might catch the light—England was at war. England had been at war three days.

War? In the egotism of her weakness it seemed a trifling thing. War . . . war. . . . There had been the Boer War too. . . . She dropped the paper indifferently.

But a thought, not of the unrealized present, but of that

dreamlike far past, remained with her, stirring her mind to exertion.

The Boer War. . . . She could just remember the red-white-and-blue ribbons in shops and the picture buttons of Redvers Buller, and Sir George White, and Kitchener, that she used to buy with her pennies. Father—that shadow of a shadow—had been killed in the Boer War. . . . He had left his business to volunteer . . . that was why they were poor. . . . She remembered—and the memory stabbed like a sudden light in a dark room—the beady rasp of carpet against her bare knees as she twisted round from her dolls' house at the sound of voices, at her Aunt Adela's voice—

“Pure selfishness in a married man, I call it—though he is my brother. What's the army for?” And then—not her mother's answer, but her mother's soft, angry, beautiful face. . . .

It was like Aunt Adela not to realize that decent men were bound to volunteer when there was a war on, like the Boer War. . . . *The Great War* by Conan Doyle. . . . She had the book somewhere . . . it had lasted three years—that great war. . . . Of course, this business——

She picked up the paper again and began to read.

And as she read, those overworked, willing servants the body and the brain of the body, roused themselves, as in crisis they always do, to meet the demands of the shocked spirit. She felt the clogging weakness drawing away from her as a cloud draws away from a hill-side. She turned from a remembered past that had seemed the extreme of trouble to a future that made that past a childish thing.

War. . . .

Deliberately she put aside the emotions that she owed the event. ‘England,’ ‘Right,’ ‘Wrong,’ ‘Victory,’ ‘Sacrifice,’ ‘Our Fleet’—these were words that could wait: it was first necessary to comprehend its personal significance. This war meant—it meant danger: and before this danger, she saw already, one would be helpless: between this danger and Justin one would not be able to interpose body or soul. . . . This—she tried to be very clear—this was war—man's war—a dragon from the fairy tales come to overwhelming,

incredible flesh and blood life. . . . It was a week old and already it was clamouring for its food. . . . 'Your King and Country want you.' . . . Father had volunteered—all decent men had to volunteer—always—in a war. . . . So Justin . . . if Justin . . . but surely Justin wouldn't have to go? At any rate, not for months and months. . . . Why should Justin go? the only son of his mother. . . . Justin would surely understand that it was not his duty . . . not yet anyhow. . . . He could do things at home. . . . No need—no need. . . . But if Justin went. . . . All decent men went. . . . He would go—he would go—he would go in spite of all—she would have to watch him go. . . . And there were more ways than one, it seemed, of losing Justin. . . .

She turned on her pillow and abandoned herself to terror—a terror beyond the decencies. She was wrenched and torn with weeping, frantic in her fear for him. He might suffer . . . He might be exposed to bodily torture. . . . He might die . . . be gone from her for ever—for ever—like a candle blown out. . . . In six months—in three months—there might be no Justin—anywhere—any more. . . .

And at that she bit and tore at her wrist lest she should scream aloud.

It was a madness that spent itself at last, as such things must, leaving her sane and heavy-eyed and ashamed. And in that desolate lull she could hear the voice, cold, disloyal, of another subtler fear—

Suppose—suppose he did not go? . . .

When Aunt Adela came back an hour later, stuffed to bursting with gossip that must on no account be imparted to the invalid, she found Laura sitting up in bed, her eyes quick and intelligent, her passivity a thing of the past.

She acclaimed her.

"My dear, you're better! You've got quite a colour."

"Yes." Laura touched the paper beside her. "You ought to have told me. Why didn't you tell me?"

Aunt Adela looked guilty.

"Did I leave——? I never meant—— My child, you weren't fit—— Laura, what are you doing?"

Laura threw back the sheets.

"I've got to get up." Then, softening at her aunt's horror, "Poor Auntie! I must have been a nuisance. But I'm all right now. Can't you see? Who was it?"

"Oh, Mrs. Gedge. Laura, don't be ridiculous! Cover yourself up! They're in such trouble. They can't hold Robin. And he was to have been ordained. I'm as patriotic as any one, but I do *not* see—— But it takes hold of the men somehow. I remember your father—— Extraordinary! People you'd never dream—— Now wouldn't you call Justin Cloud the last person——?" She checked herself. "Oh, Laura, I didn't mean to tell you—not yet—the doctor—— Now, Laura, I will not have you getting up!"

But Laura, hanging on to the edge of the dressing-table, was tugging feebly at a drawer.

"I must. I must be well. There must be things to do. D'you think I can lie here——? When did you hear?"

Aunt Adela was resigned.

"Well, if you must, I'll get you a dressing-gown. Of course, Dr. Bradley has said all along that if you could only make the effort——"

Laura swayed where she stood.

"I'm all right. When did you hear?"

"About Justin? I knew you'd be upset. Not that he'll get out. Everybody says it can't last six months. But I wonder he hasn't written. I had such a nice note from Mrs. Cloud, apologizing for not seeing me when I called. She was at home for a few days—getting things together. She is going to town for the present to be near him, till he knows where he's training. And her love to you. H.A.C. I wonder if he'll get a commission? But you'll be hearing from Justin himself in a day or two, I expect. Would you like some hot water?"

She bustled out of the room.

Laura, bent and flushed over the task of putting on stockings, for the grasshopper was still a burden for all her high-handedness, wondered how she was to convey to Aunt Adela that there would be no letters from Justin. And from that passed dully to the knowledge that if she had been patient, if she, wise in

her own eyes, had not chosen to force the issue, there would have still been 'letters' in her life. And who, pray, was she to have doubted Justin? "H.A.C.—the first week!" This was the man that she would have ruled and schooled! . . . "A shock—that's what he wants—a shock." . . . her own words were a bitter taste in her mouth. For now it had come, the shock, the real thing—no crazy schoolgirl artifice—and she was justified to her own undoing. "A private—the first week!"

Justified—thank God she was justified. But there would be no letters from Justin.

CHAPTER XXXI

JUSTIN CLOUD and Robin Gedge got their commissions on the same day. But while Robin appeared in Brackenhurst every few weeks, bronzed and broadened, to bewail his stagnancy, Justin, by luck o' war, or, as Robin jealously declared, by pulling wires, was out in France and having parcels sent to him before Brackenhurst had set up its first Belgian Committee. Laura, going in to tea with Mrs. Cloud on her way home from the Supply Dépôt in the vicarage barn, would sometimes see the parcels being done up; but she was never asked to help. That was the only difference that Mrs. Cloud ever made in her treatment of Laura. But for that circumstance Laura would have said that she knew nothing of that summer morning in another life. She seldom spoke of Justin, but when she did, it was as gently and openly as usual. Yet that she should not know all that had happened seemed incredible . . . Justin told his mother everything . . . and surely, if she knew—— Did she know? . . .

The uncertainty made Mrs. Cloud's unfailing kindness hard to bear.

But it was typical of the girl and the woman alike that they never dreamed of approaching the subject in their almost daily intercourse. If either had been less occupied it is probable that their common anxiety might have loosened at least Laura's tongue. But Mrs. Cloud was at the head of every good work in the village and Laura, as the year wore to an end, had her hands full at home. For Gran'papa, testily intolerant of cinnamon or sympathy, packing off his daughter to her dépôt, submitting grudgingly to his granddaughter's ministrations, Gran'papa, denying it with every difficult breath, fell ill. "Nothing serious, I hope, Miss

Valentine?" "No—only a cold. Every-one catches cold in winter time. Gran'papa has a cold."

But the wet bitter weather of that first winter of war was a harvester who reaped in the camps and training grounds on behalf of death himself, more bloodily busy elsewhere—a harvester whose sickle was chill and his reaping hook pneumonia—a busy harvester who yet had time to go gleaning in the bare homes of the land for such bent and broken straws as had been left behind.

Looking back, looking down the civilian death lists for which nobody has had time these three long years, you see how abnormally the old and the half-old suffered. Death after death in the 'sixties and early 'seventies—'Quite suddenly'—'After a short illness'—it comes over and over again. You think of them as old limpets, wrenched from their rocks of ages, flung, too old to learn to cling again, into the sea of this war. And then, fastening on their shocked feebleness—the cold.

In Brackenhurst alone there were more deaths in that first autumn than in all the two years before.

Old Mrs. Whittle was the first to succumb—old Mrs. Whittle, the Valentines' half bed-ridden pensioner who lived in one room at the top of rickety stairs, which Wilfred and James had never been induced to climb when they went with Laura and Nurse on Sunday afternoons to carry Mrs. Whittle beef-tea and sixpences. It always struck Laura as so unfair that because of their easy blubberings they should be allowed to wait at the foot of those witch-cottage stairs, while she, as frightened as they of the bright eyes and the hoarse whisper and the movements in the crimson shawl, always found herself following Nurse without a protest into the tiny, rank room. Yet, though she did not know it, it had not been Nurse, but her own innate fear of causing pain, that had forced her steps. More insistent than the fear of Mrs. Whittle had been the fear of hurting Mrs. Whittle's feelings. She had stolidly endured the dim airlessness, the fire that spat startlingly, the bedclothes-smell, and sometimes—setting her teeth—a kiss from Mrs. Whittle, rather than hurt the feelings of Mrs. Whittle who had rheumatics.

"Bless everybody, and Justin, and give Mother my dear love, and make Mrs. Whittle quite well," had run, in the dim years, her nightly petition.

Laura hated pain.

And now Mrs. Whittle was dead, needing neither sixpences nor Sunday visits any more from a grown-up Laura.

Old Jackson, digging her water-logged grave, in an absent son's stead, shivered and coughed in the keen wind and followed her in a week. Two children from Laura's Sunday-school fell sick of neglected colds and the listless, pining mother, in her dyed mourning, let Laura and the doctor do as they pleased. The long lists lengthened in the church porch and for a month there had been no news of Justin, not even the second-hand, meagre comfort, the 'I am quite well' of a field-postcard, filtering through to her by way of Mrs. Cloud. She had been glad to have her hands full. It helped to help people. . . . And the news got worse and worse.

And then Gran'papa had caught cold.

Aunt Adela was inclined to blame Papa. Papa had insisted on going—at his age!—all the way to the station last Sunday, to get a paper for Laura—he, who so strongly disapproved of Sunday papers. And all because Laura, at lunch, before she hurried off to those wretched children, had said something about wishing for a Sunday delivery! Papa was very difficult to manage. She had spoken to Laura seriously about it on her return. Between them they might, another time, circumvent easily enough an obstinate old man—for his own good, of course. But Laura, who was a peculiar girl in some ways, had merely stared at her aunt with those blank, black eyes, had merely said with a ridiculous catch in her voice—

"Do you mean to say that Gran'papa——" And then, breaking off in that irritating way of hers, had gone up without another word to Papa's room. Had stayed there till supper-time—had not even come down to say how do you do to the rector—had spent every spare minute of her time there since. Well—she would catch Papa's cold for a certainty, and then she would see!

But Laura did not catch Gran'papa's cold. It was not one of his usual colds, the angry, vigorous, resentful colds of his

healthy old age, but a feverish indisposition, a certain fading and shrinking of body that accompanied a glittering, fitful, mental activity. The change in him was so marked, so swift, that at the end of the week Laura looked back to the Gran'papa of last Sunday as to a memory, as to a stranger.

He would not go to bed, but sat crouched over the fire in the armchair that Laura had never before realized was so much too big for Gran'papa. She, when she could, sat with him, eternally knitting socks for the army that must always be to her but a multiplication of Justin, thinking of him and herself, and now, with new, bewildered thoughts, of Gran'papa.

She had been touched, almost beyond her strength, by that thought of his for her—by the sight of the paper in Gran'papa's shaking hand, handed to her with a gesture that he could not, even then, prevent from being gingerly. The knowledge that he had guessed something, that he had been aware of the anxiety that showed itself in her feverish lust for news, that he, behind his reserves and absorptions, had watched her, felt for her—made her want to cry. She could be Spartan, but of necessity, not from choice. There was nothing of the Emily Brontë in her nature: she took as generously as she gave. She had strength and pride, but though she did without it, she never pretended that sympathy would not have been sweet. In those days, though she did not know it, though she had nearly forgotten her, she wanted her mother.

Gran'papa's look at her as she came to him that Sunday, his silence, his awkward thrust of the rag he abhorred into her hand, did more than touch her—it strengthened her. She, to whom kith and kin had never meant much, had felt for the first time the comfort of the blood-tie, of the clan-love that is independent of all accidents of personality or desert. Gran'papa might not love Laura, but she realized at last how faithfully he loved his grand-daughter.

She had taken the paper and thanked him, and settling herself opposite him in her grandmother's chair, had sat quietly reading the aching headlines. And in the silence that followed she had felt, through all her urgent anxiety,

how the icy crust under which the quiet river of their mutual affection had always flowed imprisoned, was melting at last. They made no demonstration. It was not in his nature, even in its strength, and now he was old, enfeebled; while she had been so drilled by the necessities of her life with Justin that she wore repression, like a dress, laced over her natural impulsiveness; nevertheless they had eased each other. For the first time in her life she was not on her best behaviour with him: her little ways, the occasional mannerisms, he passed over in silence, or perhaps, because she was at her entire ease, they occurred no longer.

She nursed him, in as far as he would allow it, in her busy aunt's stead; for his cold ran no normal course: a spell of sunshine did not bricken him: he coughed and faded.

After a paroxysm—it was distressing to see him—he would lie exhausted in his chair, and sometimes wander a little or, rather, break into speech that was but drifting and idle thought. And Laura, listening, half guiltily, as one eavesdropping, marvelled how little she knew, and yet she had thought she knew, Gran'papa.

He talked to her, of his schooldays, of his youth, of mild adventures before he married. But they all led in the end, she noticed, to Grandmamma, whom she remembered vaguely as a sweet voice and a smile, in a pale-brown camel's-hair shawl.

He would speak of her, watching Laura's face and her beautiful, busy hands.

“ You don't remember your grandmamma, of course ? ”

“ You are very like your grandmamma.”

“ You are very like my wife.”

And once he called her “ Anne.”

Yet another side to Gran'papa ! Laura, as she dusted the drawing-room, would find herself pausing thoughtfully, wasting long minutes, before the faded crayon on the bamboo easel. The youthful, slim-waisted man, with the ringlets and Roman nose and serious eyes, who reminded her of *David Copperfield* and the Duke of Wellington, was, not nominally but really, Gran'papa: that was the strange part of it. Gran'papa, behind his shell of white hair, and trembling hands, and hectorings,

and fidgetiness, was—not a habit, not an institution—but a man. . . . There was a closer tie between them than the accident of kinship: they were knit by the common experience of their common humanity. . . . He was a man and she was a woman. . . . He knew—incredible that Gran’papa should know—all that she knew. . . . He had loved ‘Anne,’ who was her little old dead grandmother. . . . She remembered hints of Aunt Adela—scraps of stories about a courtship that had not been all plain sailing. . . . He, Gran’papa upstairs, knew then what pain meant—knew as well as Laura the sickness of uncertainty. . . the unnerving hopes and fears . . . knew how like a stone one’s heart could lie in one’s breast.

She remembered again—it had been so forgotten—the day Grandmamma died. Gran’papa had sat all the morning in the dining-room, instead of in his room, which made it strange enough. Gran’papa—cold, aloof Gran’papa—had been stranger still. He had sat bowed over the fire, with his big silk handkerchief in his hand. With a sort of horror Laura had watched him, had seen that he was crying. He had looked up at her then and had said—she remembered his voice and his words—“Forty years—forty years—” over and over again. And then kindly, as if he knew she were frightened—“You’ve never seen a man cry, have you, child?” And Aunt Adela had said “Papa!” in a queer, warning voice.

That was all she remembered. But the words would not leave her as she rubbed the shining chair legs and pounded ostentatiously up and down the key-board, to assure Aunt Adela, if Aunt Adela should be on the alert, that she was dusting properly.

“A man”—not “Your grandfather. . . .” “A man” . . . “My wife” . . .

So Gran’papa thought of himself as a man still. . . He was a man. . . . The years they had passed on earth, eighteen or eighty, could alter their bodies, but not their souls. . . . Gran’papa’s soul—if she win through this barrier of his old and dying body to it—was as young as hers. . . . And hers as old as his. . . . A soul hadn’t any age . . . or reckoned its age, not by years, but by wisdom, more or less, that its years had taught it. . . . And so—why shouldn’t they talk

to each other? Gran'papa might help her. . . . She might ease Gran'papa. . . . For so long he had had no one to whom to tell his thoughts. . . .

She would come up thoughtfully after her housework to spend the hour before lunch with him, to listen or to share his silence and to talk to him sometimes in her turn, jerkily, by fits and starts. She never knew how much he heard.

And then one day, quite suddenly, he took out his big pocket-book and showed her, wrapped in tissue, a strand of hair, a long coil that shone like old gold in the winter sunshine.

"She had beautiful hair," said Gran'papa.

Laura let it shower through her fingers. It was as soft and fine as her own. But Grandmamma's hair—she could just remember—had been silver, not gold. . . . Queer. . . . Life was queer. . . .

She watched him coil and fold and put away again the golden hair.

"Was Grandmamma—? Did Grandmamma—? Did you and Grandmamma—ever get angry with each other?" she asked him abruptly.

Gran'papa was staring at the fire. She knew by the turn of his head that he had heard her, but he made no answer.

They were silent for a time, each seeing what they chose in the red and black grotesques of the coal.

"She had the gentlest face," said Gran'papa at last, his lips scarcely moving. "Serene. Patient. But I have known her—firm."

Laura nodded softly.

"He is, too——"

There was a shadow of a smile on Gran'papa's face, the smile we keep for our thoughts and our ghosts.

"It never lasted long," said Gran'papa. "Only once—before I married her," He was silent again.

"It lasts—with Justin," said Laura. And then—"Gran'papa—Justin is angry with me. We are not engaged any more."

"It was my fault, I do believe," said Gran'papa to the fire.

"Oh, it was my fault," said Laura. "I think I was mad."

She sat silent. Her thoughts were a bitter sea. Its winds and waves tossed her hither and thither.

Her words came again mechanically, as if she did not know that she was speaking, like a child learning lessons in its sleep.

"If I could only tell him! If I could only make him see! I mayn't even write to him. He's fighting. Any minute may kill him. Mrs. Cloud and Rhoda and Lucy—they all write to him. And I mayn't."

"Anne wrote to me," said Gran'papa.

"He'd sneer. He'd tear it up. He'd say 'What's up now? She might have the decency to leave me alone.' Can't you hear him saying it? He doesn't want me. Why should he, for that matter?" Her fingers locked and relaxed and interlocked again. "If I could only make him understand," said Laura. "If he dies——"

"Anne died," said Gran'papa.

"Gran'papa," Laura touched his sleeve, "it's such misery."

"Anne wrote to me," repeated Gran'papa.

She moved restlessly.

"I can't. I've no right any more."

She stared across at him, questioning him with tired young eyes.

"Gran'papa—why is it? Why have we got to be so awfully unhappy?"

He muttered and smiled to himself, half hearing.

"*The time—out of joint—that's it—out of joint.* In my young days—April showers in April—May flowers in May. Anne didn't want a vote."

"There was the Crimea. I suppose there were women—just the same—widows—and lovers——"

He drummed on the arm of his chair.

"*Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.* Do you ever read Shakespeare, my dear? I advise all young people—The young people have turned the world upside down." He shivered. "It's cold."

She got up quietly and shut the window, and sat down again, pulling her chair a little nearer to him.

"Rain and soft weather and a little sun," he rambled. "Winter? We used to skate. But now-a-days——" He cleared his throat. His eye brightened. He was the old Gran'papa, declaiming—

*"The seasons alter, hoar-headed frosts
Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose—the crimson rose——"*

His voice faded. He peered at her.

"You should go for a walk. White cheeks! White cheeks!" Then—"What's the date?"

"Tuesday, Gran'papa."

"Tut—the month?"

"December."

"Ah, it fits—it always fits—

And on old Hyem's thin and icy crown—

Read him! Read him! There's a man! And died at fifty—thirty years too young to know old Hyem's ways. But he knew!" He chuckled. "I'd like to have met him," said Gran'papa condescendingly.

He stared across at his grand-daughter, lost in her own thoughts. His expression changed. He leaned forward, touching her hot, locked hands with his cold, papery fingers.

"These things pass," said Gran'papa.

He shivered again and glanced over his shoulder.

"Very cold. The window——"

Laura roused herself.

"It's shut, Gran'papa. But I'll make up the fire." She bent blindly over the dim hearth.

But Gran'papa, with a fretful sigh, got up shakily out of his chair. He was sure the window was open. Then he remembered his birds, clustering on the roof of the drawing-room below, and that he had not fed them. His fingers rattled on the pane as he threw up the sash. Very cold. . . . The wind slid in like a snake, striking at Gran'papa, but though he shivered he threw out the crumbs and stood watching the instant, twittering turmoil, with a glance now and then at the empty cage, that swung, grazing his skull-cap, overhead. He missed his bird. . . . It's notes . . . particularly fine . . . a strain of bullfinch . . . inclined to be shrill, of course . . .

but a wonderful ear . . . indeed he had had to cover the cage when he played on his fiddle for any length of time. . . . It had been—Gran'papa smiled—jealous, positively jealous, of his fiddle. . . . He thought he might get out his fiddle. He must not let his fingers get stiff. . . .

What was that? . . .

He turned sharply, holding up his finger. Absurd, of course, but he had thought, for a moment, that he heard at his ear the quick ruffling of feathers, the pretty, questioning twitter, that had always been the prelude to full-throated, indignant song. . . . The cage—

The cage, of course, was empty.

Some bird outside. . . . He had left the window open. . . . He tried, in a childish pet against the birds who had tricked his ear, to push down the sash again, but it was stiff and heavy—suddenly too stiff and heavy for Gran'papa.

He called peevishly—

“Laura!”

But she was adjusting the fire-irons and did not hear.

He left it open, and turned back again into the room. He was fumbling with his fiddle-case when Laura straightened herself, and with a smile and a show of blackened fingers, slipped out of the room.

“Come back,” muttered Gran'papa.

She meant to come back when she had washed her hands; but Aunt Adela waylaid her, discovered her using the basin in her room—inconsiderate—making fresh work—when there was the bathroom! Laura, undeniably in the wrong, had, by all unwritten rules, necessarily to pay forfeit to Aunt Adela, to attend without protest to a criticism of her untidy room, to hang up skirts under Aunt Adela's eye, to dust a mantel-piece and re-adjust ornaments to the high-pitched ripple of Aunt Adela's voice, and to respond cheerfully in the infrequent pauses.

“Yes, Auntie. Oh, of course. Yes—I think you're right.”

That, she thought, was all Aunt Adela wanted. . . . She hated having her room overhauled. . . . But, after all, what did it matter—what did anything matter now-a-days, with Justin away at the front . . . fighting. . . .

She wondered if he had liked his parcel. .

She wondered if he were still alive. . . .

“What did you say, Auntie? Oh, I see. Oh—perfectly disgraceful—I should give her notice——”

She pushed back her hair. Her back ached. She felt very tired. She wanted to get back to Gran’papa. She could hear the thin scrape of his bow, and the fiddle’s stray uncertain notes as he tuned it. And then, suddenly, swiftly, joyously, it broke into the thrice-familiar tune—

*Duncan Gray cam’ here to woo,
Ha, ha, the wooing o’t,
On blythe yule night when we were fou,
Ha, ha, the wooing o’t.*

She knew the words by heart, in the unintelligent fashion in which one knows the words of a song. But to-day they caught her ear, rang in her mind to the staccato of the fiddle, significant, suggestive.

She had often wondered that it should be such a favourite tune with Gran’papa. To-day she knew why. The music, like strong sunlight shining on a palimpsest, revealed beneath her mind’s modernity an older picture, faint and faded, of a shadowy, gallant young Gran’papa, quarrelling deliciously, a fiddle under his chin, with a slim girl who was called Anne (like *Anne*, the ‘elegant little woman’ in *Persuasion*) and sat at a pianoforte fingering out the accompaniment of an old song. She had a sweet voice and wore a dress of lavender print, but her smooth golden hair, as the impression faded again, was not golden at all, but red, a dull, beautiful red, matching exactly, as Laura was aware, with the beech leaves under which she sat as she bickered with Justin and made it up again, one spring, not sixty springs, ago.

“Laura—you’ve shut your new skirt in the cupboard door! You never look.”

“Sorry, Auntie.”

“Well, as I was saying—I went down to the kitchen directly after breakfast and I said——”

Gran’papa had been playing that day too. They could see him at his window, sawing vigorously, from where they sat. . . . Justin had made one of his comical remarks about it. . . . It

seemed such ages ago, now—that spring. . . . It had been the last of the happy times. . . . It was soon after that, that things began to go wrong . . . badly wrong. . . . Her thoughts roamed aching over all the trivial, tragical wrong that she and Justin had done each other in the eternity that was not two years—not two years. . . . Gran’papa had sixty years to retrace. Her thoughts hovered over Gran’papa awhile and then back again to Justin. He was hard. . . . She didn’t think she could be so cruel to her worst enemy as Justin was to her. . . . Not a word. . . . Not a message. . . . And not to want a word! . . . Yet he was essentially a kindly man. It was a queer lack of imagination, she supposed. . . . She supposed he never thought of her at all. . . . It was just—over—for him. . . . It never occurred to him that she loved him still . . . that she lived in hell. . . . But it wasn’t that he wouldn’t have cared if he could have understood, she told herself, in sudden passionate defence of him. He couldn’t help it—it was the way he was made. . . .

Well—she had known all that. . . . That was why she had done what she had done. She had staked all she had . . . failed . . . so she must pay. . . . Yet such a price for birds’ eggs! Birds’ eggs! Her mouth twisted sardonically. If it had happened to any one else—how Justin would have laughed . . . how they would have talked it over! She could hear him, laying down the law about it. . . . She missed that most of all—that dear, absurd solemnity of his as he laid down the law to her. . . . She stood, remembering, hardening her eyes and her heart against the tears she despised. How she missed him . . . how unspeakably she missed him. . . .

What a fool she had been. . . . What was the use of scruples? . . . Why hadn’t she kept what she had? . . . She might have been married to him at that moment. . . . Even if he didn’t love her—half a loaf was better than no bread. . . . Who was she to have imagined herself his keeper? . . . He knew his own mind. . . . He had asked her to marry him. . . .

Ha, ha, the wooing o’ t.

squeaked the violin.

“Did you ever hear of such a thing? Well—I said to her,

quite quietly, you know, but with dignity—I said to her : ‘ I think, Ellen, the time has come to make a change.’ Simply that. It was quite enough. She apologized at once.”

Laura murmured congratulations. She wished Aunt Adela would be merciful enough to stop talking, or at any rate needing answers. . . . It was so difficult to think of the right answers with that insistent tune ringing in one’s ears. . . .

It wavered and sank to a sigh as she listened against her will—

*Time and chance are but a tide ;
Ha, ha, the wooing o’t ;
Slighted love is sair to bide——*

It slackened and jarred as Gran’papa’s hand—she knew that pathetic, involuntary relaxation of his stiff fingers—mumbled the strings. But the half-learnt words ran on in her head, perverted into absurd appositeness—

She may gae to—France for me !

But it was Justin who had gone to France. . . . They were killing three hundred men a day in France—in the trenches . . . where Justin was. . . .

For long minutes her terrible phantasy made it all very clear to her, while the tune jangled on again to its happy ending—

Now they’re crouse and canty baith——

and stopped.

She waited for the last line, impatiently, as for release, as for the breaking of a spell ; but there came no sound—only a sudden silence that was louder than any sound. She roused at it, pitifully chiding herself for the selfishness of her misery and, regardless of Aunt Adela, bundled the rest of her clothes into the wardrobe and hurried out of the room.

Poor old Gran’papa . . . to leave him so long alone. . . . A string or something must have snapped. . . . She must run down and see, and get him a new one . . . the dresser drawers were so heavy for him to pull out. . . .

She ran down the stairs in her swift, noiseless fashion and tapped at his door, and tapped again, and then, with a sudden catching of breath, opened it.

She had been right: something had snapped indeed. A cord—a silver cord had been loosed; but it was not the G string of the little old fiddle.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE funeral of old Mr. Valentine, the 'To Let' board on Green Gates, and the cottage into which the Miss Valentines were to move at the March quarter, gave Brackenhurst a pleasant change from the Mad Dog of Europe and the soaring prices of meat and margarine. But long before the subject was exhausted it had to make way in turn for the news that Justin Cloud had been made a Captain—"Oh, three stars, I believe: it's the Majors that have the crown—" and that Robin Gedge had married Annabel Moulde at a registry office. It was Brackenhurst's first war wedding, and it divided the village into two camps, into those that were more thrilled than shocked and those that were more shocked than thrilled. Annabel, of course, suffered as a pionèer does; for when Rhoda Cloud, six months later, married a man she had nursed a week and known a month, it was acclaimed as a most romantic affair; but Brackenhurst, rallying round Mrs. Gedge, had few good words for Annabel—and none at all for Laura Valentine. For it came out, as such things will, that Laura Valentine had been in the secret—had actually gone up to town with Annabel and had seen her married. "Would you believe it? Such a sensible girl, and her grandfather not dead six weeks!"

"And it wasn't—" Aunt Adela wailed, "as if you'd ever been friends with Annabel!"

"I know," said Laura guiltily.

She was as puzzled at her own conduct as Brackenhurst, or as Annabel Moulde herself.

For Annabel, that silken skirmisher, had found herself, as she sheltered at Green Gates one afternoon, neither feinting, thrusting, nor awaiting attack; but, huddled over a comforting hearth, with the rain curtaining the windows, the flames dancing from her little bronze toes on the fender to Laura's

knitting needles and back again to her toes, was inexplicably impelled to confidences.

"Robin—going out—simply miserable, both of us. Mrs. Gedge—an old beast—loathes me—always has—'Wait till the war's over'—always the same old story."

It came out in jerks to the accompaniment of the crackling fire and the purring of the cat on Laura's knee.

"If I were only married to him—it would make all the difference—I could stand it then." Then, in sudden, sullen retreat: "Oh, of course, I don't expect you to understand. You think it's husband-hunting—like Mrs. Gedge."

Again there was a silence, with the flames lighting up Annabel's face and losing Laura's in the shadows of Gran'-papa's chair.

"Not that I care what you think. But if Robin's hurt—they'll keep me out. I couldn't even wear mourning."

Laura's exclamation could have meant anything—but Annabel reddened, stammering a little—

"Well, but—can't you understand? It's true. I'd have no right—I want my right. And—and I've never felt like that about any of my boys. I never did about Robin himself—till the war. But now—— Oh, Laura, what am I to do?"

"Do? What can any one do?" Laura's voice was as expressionless as her face.

"No—that's just it. And yet—I tell you, Laura, sometimes I'm ready to take Robin at his word and marry him in spite of his mother."

"He wants that?" Laura paused a moment in her work and considered the pretty, blubbered face thoughtfully.

"Well—what do you think?" Annabel's smile suited her better than tears.

"I—see. Well, why don't you, then?" Laura turned her sock with a flick.

Annabel stared at her.

"What—d'you mean—run away? Really? Seriously?"

"Why not?"

Annabel giggled nervously.

"Well—I haven't any money to begin with. I've spent my next quarter already."

"I'd lend you some. And Robin would meet you in town."

"But—but—how could I? Mother would never get over it. Mother's terrified of Mrs. Gedge. I couldn't——"

"Oh, well then——"

Laura dropped the subject indifferently.

They sat awhile in silence.

Annabel fidgeted. Her restless eyes wandered round the room.

"I ought to be going. The rain's stopped," she volunteered at last.

"Oh—must you?" Laura rose courteously.

"Laura—" Annabel stooped to pick up the disgruntled tabby stretching itself indignantly on the hearthrug—"Laura—if I did—Laura—do you honestly think it would be right?"

"Right?" The flames had found Laura's face at last, lighting up, laying bare its weakness and its strength, soft eyes and tender mouth and the new hard lines about eyes and mouth alike. "Right? You're a woman, aren't you? You've a man fighting for you? You give what you can and take what you can—while you've the chance! Right?" Her voice deepened. "It's your own two lives! Don't you let them rob you—even if they are your own people. They talk about prudence and marry in haste—and tell you to wait—and wait—and wait! It would be devilish the way they talk, if they understood. But of course—they can't. They're old. They've forgotten. They mean well. But you—you take your chance!"

"But—but—" began Annabel helplessly.

"And there's another thing. You talk about rights. It's not only your right. The children—our children—they have their right to be born. Well—and if he is killed and you are poor—you'll be able to feed a child, and clothe it, and teach it to read, I suppose—if you can't send it to Eton. You give it life anyway, and love, and care. That ought to be good enough. 'What porridge had John Keats?'"

"But—you talk," Annabel whimpered. "I only want Robin."

Laura, pulled up short, stared at her a moment. Then she laughed.

"I know. Of course. Of course I know. And—and—" she flushed prettily. "All I meant—I only mean, my dear—it's no business of mine—but if you want backing, I'll back you. There's a telephone in the next room. He's at Maidstone, isn't he? It's a trunk call. Aunt Adela won't be in till supper. You go and talk things over with Robin."

And the end of it was that Annabel and Laura went up to town by an early train one fine morning, for a day's shopping. And indeed they did buy various trifles, besides a white coat and skirt, and a white beaver hat, and an inconspicuous bunch of lilies of the valley with a sprig of orange blossom tucked away in the middle—but they were a present from Laura. Laura came home alone with a note for Mrs. Moulde and another for Mrs. Gedge in her pocket (she thrust them through the letter-boxes and fled) and, as I told you, was cold-shouldered by the vicarage long after Robin and Annabel had been forgiven.

But though Mrs. Cloud included the vicarage set in her visitors' list, the vicarage set could not claim the honour of including Mrs. Cloud. At any rate, Mrs. Cloud gave no sign of disapprobation: might have been thought, indeed, to be kinder of late to Laura. But Mrs. Cloud was always kind. Certainly it did Laura no harm to be met at the Priory more often than usual by Brackenhurst: indeed, as she called in for the third day running on some small errand—a basket of early primroses, I believe, that a school child had given her, but that were so obviously grown for the great glass bowl in the yellow parlour that she had to pass them on—she thought, to herself, she would not permit herself to think, that it was like old times. . . .

CHAPTER XXXIII

LAURA handed her basket to the maid, but she had not long to wait. Mrs. Cloud was at home, quite eagerly at home to an opportune Laura. Laura wondered at the warmth of her greeting, at the gaiety of her air.

It was the first fine day of the spring, and the sun was doing his best for an earth still wind-swept and doubtfully green, yet the light and warmth and the radiance that filled the room seemed to emanate, not from him, but from Mrs. Cloud herself, sitting in a glory by her windowful of half-grown daffodils, her lap a tumble of telegram and envelope and Laura's primroses, young lights in her eyes, and a letter, a letter, in her hand.

Justin had got his leave, Laura! Justin had got his leave at last! Justin was coming home—had written twice—contradictorily—and now a wire! He would be home to-morrow night. And in the meantime his letter had come, the letter he had written before he was quite sure.

If it had arrived earlier Laura might have heard less about it; but the gate at the end of the drive had barely closed on the postman before it had opened again to her, and Mrs. Cloud, full of her good tidings, had yielded to old custom and the comfort of a listener. So Laura, though she was not allowed to read the letter herself—such privileges were hers no longer—yet heard its every word read aloud by a voice that, strengthened by excitement, was more than ever the softened, haunting shadow of Justin's.

Such a delightful letter as it was too—such a hasty, pencilled letter that yet found time to be full of problematical orderly detail of his itinerary, to be margined with instructions as to what his mother was and was not to do in the matter of coming to town and meeting trains—a letter that had been so obviously

written, not by Captain Cloud of the Kentshires, but by H. J. Cloud of the Lower Fifth, arriving for his half-term holiday and leaving no item of the program to chance. Justin could write a good letter, couldn't he, Laura?

Laura, always quiet and now quieter than ever, with controlled hands and two bright spots of colour in her tired face, made the little necessary ejaculations, steering so delicately between indifference and absorption, that Mrs. Cloud enjoyed her responses as she enjoyed music, as a soothing accompaniment to her own thoughts. So impersonal, indeed, could Laura be, that it was not until she was left alone again that Mrs. Cloud realized that she had broken through her rule of avoiding the subject of Justin—the rule that she had devised, half to spare and half to punish a criminal Laura.

She shrugged her shoulders. She could not be deeply disturbed. Her anger, for she had had her guess-work anger on behalf of an injured but uncommunicative son, had long ago died down. It smouldered, of course, flickering up occasionally into perplexed resentment: would never, I think—though Justin and Laura should miraculously adjust their differences—be completely extinguished; for it was not in Mrs. Cloud's nature, so sweetly oblivious of sins against herself, ever to forgive a harshness or forget a kindness rendered to those she loved; but the hot ashes of it were hidden deep in her heart—she had found herself able, in time, to be reconciled, to pretend justice to Laura. She said to herself very often that she did not want to be unkind. . . . Justin, she admitted, was not an ordinary boy. . . . He had needed understanding—and Laura was very young. . . . If only they had either of them seen fit to confide the cause of their quarrel to her, she was sure that she could have helped them over it. . . . Justin was so much her own son that his reserve could not hurt her, but she thought Laura should have come to her. . . . She thought Laura owed her that. . . .

Mrs. Cloud, you see, was hampered by being fond of Laura. She missed her, for Laura did not come as often as in the old days: and Laura, as more than Mrs. Cloud had discovered, had her insidious, disconcerting way of becoming indispensable. You tolerated the harmless creature, acknowledging even a

pleasant quality in it, as of unobtrusive furniture, and then, one day, when you felt yourself most free, it would turn on you, not a chair, not a table, but a laughing woman, who challenged you, with a twinkle, to try and do without her.

But Mrs. Cloud did not go into that. She only knew that of all possible daughters-in-law she would have objected least to Laura Valentine. For she and Laura had always shared, though they did not know it, their prophetic dread of the Minx, rouged, gilded, and irresistible, who, if they were not extremely careful, would one day carry off Justin and make him miserable. Justin's deportment at garden-parties, his invincible indifference to musical comedies and mixed tennis, might reassure them momentarily, but they never really believed that he could be trusted by himself. And now he was in uniform—For they knew, the worldly twain, cynically they knew *What Women Were!* There was that girl, for instance, that much-advertised friend of Rhoda's—with the ear-rings—who had openly announced herself as dying to meet Captain Cloud. Hussy! Impassive Laura, handing tea-cakes, had been so grateful to Mrs. Cloud for sniffing.

But then, in spite of their differences, Mrs. Cloud and Laura always did understand each other.

Laura said good-bye at last, and went away, leaving Mrs. Cloud in a happy fever of activity, bewildering herself with Bradshaw, interviewing the coachman, and in defiance of her half a dozen servants, airing sheets at the drawing-room fire. Master Justin—Captain Cloud, I mean—is coming home!

Justin—Captain Cloud, I mean—is coming home.

The theme was Mrs. Cloud's, rang in her head in Mrs. Cloud's voice, but the intricacies of its variations were Laura's own. She was utterly unable to force her mind from the subject. Her brain was like a keyboard at which her soul sat fingering out the Harmonious Justin, till she was ready to scream. Her share of what the village called war-work had not been light, and she was besides so wearied out by the strain and the pain and the unlifting terror of the past months, that her thoughts were often able to escape her control, to weaken her still further by their irresponsibility. There were times when she could not think consecutively at all: and yet she could never

stop thinking, and at a furious rate, till her mind seemed a cosmos bereft of gravity.

Into that chaos, which even Mrs. Cloud could never have connected with Laura of the trim blue serges, and the Refugee Committee, and the restful, smiling ways—into that chaos of dead hopes and living fears, Mrs. Cloud's news flashed like a comet, brilliant, portentous. Justin was coming home.

She tried to be blind to this new light in her sky. She told herself that it had nothing to do with her, that she must not, in pride, in decency, let her thoughts be concerned with him. . . . But Justin was coming home! . . . She had no right, she reminded herself fiercely, to be sorry or glad any more for Justin. . . . But at least he would be safe. . . . For a whole week he would be safe. . . . She might sleep sound, if she could, for a whole week. . . . She need not even pray. . . . All she might do—all she could do—for a Justin safely home again, was to keep out of his way. . . . He would not want to see her. . . . She would not afford him, or herself, the embarrassment of a meeting. . . . She would not spoil his holiday by appearing to exist. . . .

She thought that she ought to go away altogether—pay some invented visit to imaginary relatives. . . . But that she could not do. . . . That—probing her soul—she could not do. . . . She found she had not, literally, the strength to leave Brackenhurst when Justin was coming home. But she would keep out of his way. . . .

Not that it would upset Justin if he did run into her. . . . He would pass her—she could see him—as carelessly as he might pass some futile cur that had once snapped at him. . . . He would have put her out of his mind by now, definitely and completely. . . . She knew his indifferent, inexorable way. . . . She had bruised herself often enough against his unimagination, his sturdy mind that was like a house with one window. Oh, he saw life clearly through it—but how little he saw! But there was no use in going over that. . . . All she had to remember was to keep out of his way. . . . But she would not leave Brackenhurst. . . . For if Justin—suppose that Justin—suppose that by some miracle Justin had changed—had

learned to forgive—to forget—to want her again! Miracles did happen. . . .

You are right—she cannot, at the time of his leave, have been quite sane. For, all the long week, she lived, fiercely as she denied it to herself, in mad, fantastic expectation of that miracle. Every passer-by on the long road, every click of the gate, every bell rung in the kitchen, every footstep on the gravel, from the paper-boy before the maids came down to the gardener going home at night, was Justin—was Justin! Fifty times in the weary day the impossible happened, the miracle was vouchsafed, and Justin came to her—Justin, who never came. In the window-seat, above the white high-road, where, so many years ago, she had watched for the coming of another love, she crouched again and peered out at the passers-by, and starved and starved for him.

Yet life ran on as usual in Brackenhurst, though Belgium smoked to heaven and Justin were home on leave: and Laura had her duties. Two days' grace, or three, might be allowed her for her imaginary headache—but on the fourth Brackenhurst clamoured for its indispensable Miss Valentine, and she must set out through by-ways to her Belgians and her babies, to lunch at the other end of the village, with an afternoon's sewing to follow, and must keep her eyes bright and her tongue wagging to amuse her world the while.

The sun was near the edge of the earth before the Dépôt gates closed on her and she was her own mistress again.

She hesitated. She was very tired, and Aunt Adela would be fretful if she were late for tea. . . . She felt that a scolding from Aunt Adela, the rasp of her plaintive voice, must at all costs be avoided. . . . She felt that she might turn Tartar if Aunt Adela scratched her just then—which wouldn't be fair to poor old Aunt Adela. . . . Besides, she had no business to keep Aunt Adela waiting. . . . She must take the short cut. . . .

She had hesitated because, though it saved her a mile, it was a cut that ran across the Priory woods, driving a broad grass-way through the heart of them, and rounding at one point the Priory garden itself. And yet—it was ridiculous

to be late for tea, to involve oneself with an irritable aunt, just because her nearest way home skirted Justin's property. . . . Would Justin be wandering in damp woods at this time o' day—at his tea-time o' day? . . . She knew Justin. . . . Besides, what should he do in the woods? He didn't collect birds' eggs any more. . . .

She turned into the shining chestnut thickets, for she knew the fox-ways of the undergrowth, and emerged again, breathless, briar-whipped, into the green, central glade, where the grass was twenty feet wide and the white violets grew. This was her undoing. Laura could never resist flowers. If Laura were being ferried over to hell she would still have plunged to the elbow in the Styx, I think, after its blotched lilies—and these were violets, English and very sweet. And they were the first of the year. Do you think there is any one too old and too sad to pick white violets when they get the chance?

Laura was sad enough, but she was only twenty. Forgetting her hurry, she stooped down and began picking violets.

There were so many of them that the ground was soon covered with tiny short-stalked bunches, tied up with Aunt Adela's khaki knitting wool.

The soft spring air was like new milk after the close, peopled room she had left. The scent of the violets pleased her. Each flower as she picked it sent its ghost, like a little white thought, into her mind, to soothe and heal and sweeten it. She was so blessedly absorbed, and the grass was so thick and mossy, that she heard nothing, neither footsteps nor creak of boots, till a voice, a familiar voice, spoke above her.

"Why, Laura!" said the voice.

She was on her feet in an instant, but she was badly startled. For, after all her reckonings, it was Justin—Justin, taking like herself his short cut through the woods to his tea—Justin, whom she had not seen for nearly a year—Justin, who was never going to speak to her again.

She gave him a wavering, frightened smile—a smile that deprecated its own existence, that assured him that it held no graceless hint of welcome or intimacy, that it continued merely as the only salutation that the lips on which it trembled

could at the moment attempt. And with that faded again and left a white face whiter.

"Why, Laura!" repeated the miraculous Justin, in the kind, solemn voice that had not altered for all her wickedness, for all the war.

She found hurried words in which to answer, excusing herself when there was no need.

"I was going home. And I was late. So I came this way. I only stopped for a moment—to pick the violets——"

She stooped for her basket, huddling into it all the little bunches that lay on the grass. She was thankful to have a use for her betraying hands.

He was watching her, but she did not know what he thought, for she was afraid to look up and see. She had her basket filled too soon, and thereupon she stood like a schoolgirl not knowing what to say or do. She moved a step or two at last, to enable him to give her good-bye and go his way. But his way was hers, it seemed: and he walked beside her in silence down the green grass lane, between the whispering, watching trees. If he thought of his tea he thought also, I suppose, that Mrs. Cloud would keep it hot for him. He was quite right: his mother would have kept it hot for him till the crack of doom. But it is just possible that he did not think about his tea.

Laura's eyes were decorously on the increasing circle of sky at the end of the alley; yet with quick stolen glances now and then, she gleaned news of him. She thought he looked tired, older—a grey look. . . . She thought he did not look well. . . . She disliked his yellowish clothes. They did not suit him. . . .

Well—at least she had seen him in his uniform. . . . She had not realized before, she thought contradictorily, how jolly the ugly uniform could look. . . . She thought how ordinary every other soldier she had seen would look beside him. . . . She tried not to be ridiculously proud of him, because she had no right, no right—to that exquisite pride. . . . She thought that she had not been mistaken—there was no one in the world like him. . . .

They came to a footpath through the hazel underwood that

ran at right angles to the broad grass-way. She was sure he would make it his excuse for leaving her if he did not want to talk. And how should he possibly want to talk to her? . . . But Justin swung past the opening with no more than a switch with his cane at the low-hanging catkins that sent the pollen in clouds into the air. The target of sky still seemed a long way off. Almost she could have wished that he had left her, the silence oppressed her so. She supposed that she ought to talk to him about the war. . . . Ridiculous phrases flitted through her head—‘How do you like the trenches?’ ‘Do the guns make much noise?’—but she could think of no sensible opening.

At last to her intense relief, for speech was always as much her protection as silence was his, he opened his mouth.

“And how have you been rubbing along?” said Justin.

“Oh, all right,” said Laura. Then brilliantly: “Have you been all right?”

“Oh, quite all right,” said Justin.

There was an interval for meditation.

“Miss Adela pretty fit?” enquired Justin.

“Oh, splendid,” said Laura.

“I should have called—but it’s such a short leave—I wish you’d explain——”

“Oh, she quite understood,” said Laura too readily, and felt the conversation sag in her hands like a caught cricket ball. She made an effort.

“Have a decent crossing?” she hazarded.

“Quite decent,” said Justin.

“Oh—good!” said Laura.

They paused again.

Laura thought she would leave things to him: she knew by experience that if he did not want to talk nothing would make him: she did not think he was embarrassed, for he had always been too absorbed in himself to be self-conscious: therefore, if he talked, it would have some significance. She waited, passively curious; for the shock of meeting him had, for the time, numbed her. She was as calm as is the heart of a whirlwind.

And soon, as she expected, he explained himself.

"Mother's been looking out for you," he told her severely. "Why didn't you come? She says you always come on Tuesdays."

'Why didn't you come?' She threw up her hands over the denseness of his Justinity, as she lied to him.

"Oh—I'm awfully sorry. I didn't know—I mean I forgot. I mean—I've been so fearfully busy this week."

"What with?" he enquired.

"Oh, I don't know," said Laura.

"Well, if you can, you might look in to-morrow," he decided. "You see, I have to be out."

She glanced up at him: glanced down again. And then, suddenly, all the dry deadness of her heart broke, like the pope's staff, into bud, into little blossoms of laughter, delicate bell-flowers that rang out in a thousand fairy carillons of healing mirth.

Dear old Justin! . . . 'You see—I have to be out.' So exactly what Justin might have been reckoned upon to say. . . . Her lips quivered: her shoulders shook: she was in desperate danger of laughing aloud. She saw so clearly the absurdity of their situation that it was all at once naked of its embarrassment, of its sting. She wanted to share the joke with him, but that was impossible. He would not have been Justin if he could have seen the funny side of himself.

'You see—I have to be out.' . . .

'Yes, Justin dear—Yes, Justin dear—I quite understand!' she crooned to herself with wicked, bright-eyed merriment.

"And the next day," continued his unconsciousness, "I go back, you know."

The bells stopped ringing.

"Oh!" said Laura sedately.

The circle of light had grown into an arch that was wide as the sky. They crunched off the soft grass on to the chalk of the road stretching north and south of them to Green Gates and the Priory.

She found that they were to shake hands.

"Well—so long!" said he.

"So long!" said she,

They went their ways.

And that was the end, for Laura, of Justin's first leave.

But she felt better. If it had done her good to see him, it had done her all the good in the world, she thought, to laugh at him.

What Justin thought, History does not say.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE spring and summer passed like one of those interminable nightmares whose horror is in the fact that it is ever about to be revealed, and never is revealed, to the dreamer.

Mrs. Cloud and Laura opened their papers at breakfast, to read and shudder and murmur mechanically, "Their poor wives—God help them!" but the guilty sense of reprieve would be gone before the meal was ended. Fear was to be their portion rather than fact: and Mrs. Cloud, for one, broke under the burden. She spoke little, never of herself; but she grew visibly older, turning under Laura's anxious eyes into a silent old woman, content to sit in the sun. But gradually Laura realized that she was aware of her own failing strength, that she husbanded it of set purpose, that her very quietude was deliberate. When it was necessary she had words and counsel.

She never missed writing to her son—quiet, cheerful letters in a firm hand. And the answers she would read aloud to Laura.

"A good boy, Laura—to write so often. Three nights without sleep again—but he writes!"

Laura had her secret marvel at it, at these letters, so like and so unlike Justin. Their frequency amazed her: their familiar matter-of-factness made her smile; but there were touches in them beyond her knowledge of him. He did not take his discomforts seriously. There was actually humour—a trifle crude, more than a trifle grim—but humour. Once he made fun of himself. And he was anxious about his mother—eloquent in each letter on the absurdity, nay, the sin, of worrying. And he wanted to know how she slept. Once he said, 'Tell Laura to look after you!' He said that! He trusted her, you see, in spite of everything. He trusted her.

She lived on that phrase for weeks.

And indeed she looked after Mrs. Cloud. She spent more and more of her time at the Priory, bringing her war-work with her, and gradually the control of the reduced household slipped into her hands. Mrs. Cloud's small ailments increased in frequency, and it was natural that the driven doctor and the anxious maid should turn to Miss Laura rather than to the invalid. And there was Timothy. Timothy, rising five, with ideas of his own (Coral cropping up freakishly in the sound Cloud soil, Timothy, embarrassingly devoted, and a great deal too much for his grandmother, had become a problem: and until the ideal nurse who did not quarrel with Mary and did not want special attention had been discovered (but they were all at munitions) he was inevitably Laura's business. She undertook, at any rate, to tire him out for a couple of hours every day, after which 'the temporary,' a hare-eyed child with adenoids, was supposed to be able to cope with him.

Timothy enjoyed that summer. He was always more than ready for his stern Miss Valentine to take him out for a little exercise. Timothy's idea of exercise was a variant of tip-and-run in the field behind the barns. Timothy tipped and Laura ran. But when human nature dropped at last, protesting, on a hay-cock, Timothy was always kindly resigned to a rest. He would dig like a terrier at the next cock, till he had shaped 'a arm-chair' into which Laura would be inducted with much ceremony and provided with a dock-leaf fan. These were courtesies for which stories ("true stories, not silly old fairies," was the typical Cloud proviso) were considered a graceful acknowledgment.

Laura, beautifully trained before a week was out, would accordingly parade for his criticism such desperadoes of antiquity as Daniel, Jack the Giant Killer, Oliver Twist, Jonah, and invariably conclude the entertainment, by request, with that favourite legend of her own childhood—"How Uncle Justin threw the porridge at Miss Beamish!"

"Well——" and Timothy would squirm with excitement, "once upon a time—when Uncle Justin-at-the-war was *quite* a little boy——" and so on to the enthralling catastrophe:

"And there was *poor* Miss Beamish with her hair all messed——"

"He was awful—wasn't he?"

"Awful isn't the word!"

"Umn. Go on."

"Well—that's about all."

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"Umn." Then, with the careful artlessness of childhood—

"Well—shall we play a game now?"

"What shall we play?"

"Well—you be Miss Beamish and *I'll* be Uncle Justin."

And when Laura had been realistically pelted with hay, Timothy, still devising devilry, would be suddenly fatigued and would drop himself, like a toy he was tired of carrying, solidly into Laura's lap, and fall asleep there and then, his knobby little grass-stained knees pressed against her, his hands, at the least movement, tightening on her arm.

And while he slept and long after he was awake again and had run in to his dinner, she could feel those small hands clutching, not her arm, but her very heart, and wonder that in the touch there could be such pleasure and such pain.

Children—the very word was music. . . . What must it be like to have children of one's own—one's own? . . .

But that was one of the things, she supposed, that she would have to do without—just have to do without—unless . . . unless. . . .

And then the wild thoughts that breed in a mind grown conscious of its needs, its spiritual and bodily needs, would rise in battle against her.

If Justin didn't want her? . . . She was young. . . . It was a big world . . . must she starve? . . .

And then she would shiver away again from such rescue, perceiving that Justin, living or dead, was like a sword between her and any other man; that isolation, right and natural and torturing as her needs were for love and children and the warmth of a common hearth, was the price she must pay for all that he had taught her—he, who knew so little of what he taught. And perceived also that if she were not to

be happy—as she reckoned happiness—it was not his fault, but the fault of her own nature. She had railed so often at his un-imagination—but how much greater was her own, that could conceive no happiness apart from him? Yet knowing at last her own nature, could she wish it changed? If she were offered Lethe, would she drink?

She believed not.

And then she would be filled with a fierce disgust at herself that she could be thus occupied with her personal affairs, with the infinitely unimportant pains and perplexities of her own toy tragedy, when, if she stood quiet and the day were still, she could hear, so far away that it was less sound than a tremor of the air, the mutter of the Flanders guns.

CHAPTER XXXV

JUSTIN'S next leave was nominally due in June. In September he began to be hopeful of getting it : his Christmas epistles were models of linguistic control : and he arrived soon after New Year to laugh at his sympathetically indignant household for taking any notice of anything he might have said in a letter : and, sobering, to be angry with his mother for waiting at home for him instead of going to Bournemouth like a sensible woman till the raids and the fogs were over. He could have wired ! She could have got back in half a day : or he could have gone down to her, even if it were jollier, in a way, to spend his leave at home. Laura ought to have packed her off long ago, instead of letting her sit day after day on that windy hill-top catching influenza !

But Mrs. Cloud, sitting up in bed and coughing between her smiles, would not have Laura blamed. She did not know what she and Timothy should have done without Laura—and would Laura run down once again, dear, to see that Mary understands about an early lunch ? “ And now, my son, let me look at you——”

Laura slipped away.

It was a dreamlike week. It was so utterly incredible to her that circumstances should have once more established her at the Priory, that she could confront the situation with comparative calmness, could even put aside her human prerogative of saying suspiciously to happiness, “ Yesterday you were not ! To-morrow, where will you be ? ” and bask as complacently as a cat or a flower in the spell of sunshine. But she could not believe it to be real.

For she found herself sitting down to meals with Justin, catching scraps of his talk with his mother, making no bones about sending him out of the room when she thought Mrs.

Cloud had had enough excitement, finding him ten minutes later, when she had pulled the blind and settled Mrs. Cloud for a nap and had come downstairs again, tapping the barometer, raking the bookshelves or lounging by the fire, abstractedly admiring the set of his puttees, bored by the weather, very ready to talk to her. That, you see, was what amazed her. She could understand his acceptance of her, with reserve, as a necessary evil while his mother was ill; but—he was ready to talk to her! He was himself with her, unembarrassed, friendly, apparently unconscious that he had a right to be otherwise. It was unbelievably generous. It was in every way too good to be true. She could not understand it in the least. It was the most astonishing thing that had ever happened. It took her just five minutes to become entirely accustomed to it.

Yet she found that in his talk he was gradually and unwittingly explaining himself to her. He was on a holiday: he wanted to be happy. He was unconsciously doing what she was doing consciously. He was trying to put aside all that could spoil his respite.

How great that respite was he told her, not knowing that he told her, in a hundred tragi-comic ways. She was ready to cry over his little comfortable movements in his chair, his new, observant appreciation of the decencies of life. His extraordinary interest in the concerns of the Gedges and the Clouds and the Mouldes, expressed as it was with all the old lordliness of manner, was so funny that, but for the lump in her throat, she could have laughed outright. Dear Justin—he had always been thorough! . . . And then her attention would be caught afresh by some unwonted gesture, some unfamiliar sentiment: and she would tell herself anxiously that her disturbance was out of all proportion to such causes. They were trifles, merest trifles . . . but they pained and touched her. It struck her that he was boisterous in his laughter over very simple jokes. He moved more heavily, had acquired a nervous trick of the hands. He was patently anxious to put the war out of his mind, and it was obvious that he could not do it. They would find themselves talking of the war, he speaking as if compelled, yet with increasing

unwillingness, flagging into dull silence, and then, rousing himself, beginning to talk of it again, formally, lifelessly, incessantly. Bad for him—she knew that it was bad for him . . . She wondered if he thought her efforts to divert him mere callousness? . . . Yet surely he must have his holiday in peace? . . . It was their business—hers and his mother's—to see that he went back to his intolerable duty with an aired and rested mind. But how? . . . Was it, she wondered, better for him first to disburden himself as he wanted, yet did not want, to do? . . .

But at that she was, again, uneasily aware of change in him, of a new reserve between them, a reserve born, not of their personal estrangement, but of an experience unshared. Where she had imagined, he had seen. It was not wonderful if, subconsciously, he distrusted her capacity, the capacity of any safe and sheltered woman, to enter into his memories, see with his eyes. But she, acknowledging, not the justice, but the inevitability of his attitude, thought only, 'What does that matter? The thing is to make him rest. I'm a poor creature if I can't get him out of himself.' . . .

And on the third day she got her opportunity.

The second had passed in a whirl of excitement and laughter (only a little forced) and pleasure at his return, and anxiety and fondness for his mother, in silent meals that had given Laura her first inkling of the cloud upon him. On the third day he had gone to town to do his necessary shopping, and, in delighted extravagance, had brought back half Covent Garden for Mrs. Cloud, and chocolates for no one in particular, and complicated mechanical toys that did not appease Timothy. For Timothy, playing second fiddle for the first time since his grandmother had adopted him, had a grievance against his Uncle Justin. Timothy gave Laura a bad moment as she put him to bed.

"Did you say thank-you to Uncle Justin when you said good-night?"

"Don't like Uncle Justin." Timothy wriggled from under the towel.

"Oh, Timothy when he brought you that lovely motor-car!"

"Don't like old motor-car. Want to see the birds in Uncle Justin's room."

"*What*, my duck?"

"Birds sitting on eggs in Uncle Justin's room. Grannie told me, only they're locked up till Uncle Justin comes home."

"Grannie said that? Are you sure, Timmy?"

"Yes, and said Uncle Justin would show me. And Uncle Justin wouldn't. Said—said—Uncle Justin said——"

"Said what, Timothy?"

Timothy scowled adorably.

"Don't like Uncle Justin. Where's my motor-car?"

"But Timothy——"

"Want my motor-car."

And Laura, having been acquainted with that particular tone in the Cloud voice for some thirteen years, gave him his motor-car and said no more.

But she went down to dinner and Justin with bright eyes and a flushed face, and had little to say as she sat thinking across to him over the pot of daffodils.

'So—so you never told your mother! But you tell her everything! It was decent of you—it was good of you—not to tell your mother. . . .' And then, with such a pang of pride in him, 'It was like you. Any one else—— It was awfully good of you not to tell your mother.' . . .

And that evening, as they came down from Mrs. Cloud's room (Mrs. Cloud hoped to get up the next day) she found herself, because that tale of Timothy's had given her the strangest courage, able to find the right words, the right silences, able to unlock him at last.

And he spoke—to the room, to the fire, to his own hands, rather than to her—of certain things daily seen and heard and endured: spoke with a flatness of tone, a baldness of phrase, that, to her at least, underlined his facts as no eloquence could have done. He doled out horror like a school-marm teaching dull children to read.

'The cat ate the rat.'

"Stuck him up against a wall and shot him."

"Wiped out forty——"

"And after that there wasn't much Fritz left!"

And, urged on as it were by her quivering receptiveness, spoke finally of experiences, not (she thanked God) his own, yet of his own first-hand knowledge : and found no other way to tell her than with a hard stare, in direct and brutal sentences, as if he thought—

‘ Well, if it comes to that, why shouldn’t you know ? Do you good—you home people ! ’

She knew that his contempt was unconscious, impersonal ; that she had no right to wince at it ; nevertheless, it hurt. She wanted to say, ‘ It’s not fair. I do understand. As if I wouldn’t cut off my hands to be there instead of you ! It’s you who’ll never understand,’ and shook off that egotism to listen to him again, and had her reward when he ended, quite naturally and simply, in turning from the subject at last with that air of relief for which she had worked and hoped, with a comfortable relaxation of his whole body, and a smile that told her that he was feeling better and was ready to be amused.

Ten minutes later, with the victorious inconsistency of their race, they were shaking with laughter over the new Bairns-father drawings.

The next day—already it was his last day but one—was a festival : Mrs. Cloud was to come down to tea and to stay up to dinner.

She had no business to do either, as she and Laura and the doctor knew, but—Mrs. Cloud was coming down !

They bargained with the doctor.

If it were a fine warm day— (But it was wet and cold.)

If she kept quiet all the morning— (‘ Then you must look after Justin, Laura ! ’)

If she promised to go to bed again really early——

If—if——

In short——Mrs. Cloud was coming down.

Hard upon Laura to be bothered with Justin, wasn’t it ? When she was so particularly busy ; when she had promised the Dépôt more work than she knew how to get through. But she made no objection whatever : came downstairs to him with obliging readiness : sat listening with an air that

might have been mistaken for satisfaction, to the windy rain thudding at the windows. No going out in such rain!

She took up her half-finished sock and then had to put it down again to help Justin. Justin was raking through the bookshelves.

"Here—what can I take back? Something solid. I'm sick to death of sevenpennies. Mother is comical, you know. She's got twice my brains—but the books she chooses!" He laughed: "I know she goes by the cover."

"You've read all these." Laura ran her hand along the shelves. "No good giving you poetry, I suppose?" She pulled out *Men and Women*. "Remember how Oliver was always spouting the Italian things?"

He sighed.

"He gave me that book too, poor devil!"

She looked at him, startled.

"Why—what?"

"Didn't you see it? Artists' Rifles. Shot, his first week out."

"*Oliver*?"

He looked at her with a sad enough smile.

"Brings it home a bit, doesn't it?"

She shook her head incredulously.

"I never saw it. I never knew." And then: "His poor wife——"

Justin lit his pipe.

"I only met her once. She's married again, I believe."

There was a silence, with Laura, whipping over page after page of the volume in her hand. Suddenly she flamed out—

"Such women—such women—they make you ashamed." Her eyes were pitiless.

Justin frowned thoughtfully.

"I don't know. I don't suppose he left her much to live on. And she was an awfully pretty girl."

But at that, after one look flashed at him, she stared the more resolutely at her book, lest he should see the amazement, the quick incredulous appreciation, in her eyes. There had been no superiority in his voice—nothing but the real tolerance of comprehension! It was not he, but she, Laura,

who stood reproved for a lack of common charity. . . . Poor—young—an awfully pretty girl! . . . He was right. . . . It was not for them to judge. . . . But what had happened to Justin that he could see it and say it? . . . In a bewilderment so near happiness that it frightened her, she began to talk at random.

"Yes—yes—I suppose so. Well—will you take it then? There's heaps of reading in it."

He laughed.

"Too much for me. I started *Sordello* once. Pity he would try to rhyme prose instead of singing songs." He looked over her shoulder, his eyes caught by the italics that laced the close print like birds' voices ringing through a wood. "Ah—that's better! *Flower o' the rose*— What is it?"

"*Lippi*. You know! Oliver was mad about it. Oliver always said that Browning was a painter spoiled himself."

He nodded.

"Shouldn't wonder. Oliver generally knew what he was talking about. That now—

*Flower o' the peach,
Death for us all, and his own life for each!*

Now that's good. That's likeable. That's poetry and truth too. But the rest goes wrenching and jerking along like—like Vulcan. Club-foot divinity."

Again she was astonished. It was what she had always thought—but that he should think so too—should put it into words for her—was epoch-making. She was overwhelmed by the remorseful conviction that she had always and systematically undervalued him. She was so much occupied by that discovery that she did not notice, till he called to her to "listen to this rot" that the book had slid from her hand to his, that he was settling into his chair, preparing to see-saw delightfully, abolishing Browning and relenting to Browning, for the rest of the morning.

It was not quite what Laura wanted; but it was very pleasant.

And she finished her sock.

CHAPTER XXXVI

AND so, before he had more than arrived, as it seemed, Justin's last day came.

He was to catch the four-twenty. Mrs. Cloud, refusing to admit fatigue after her successful evening on the sofa, was planning to be up again—down, at least, for lunch—ready to see the poor boy off. But Justin decreed otherwise. Justin, painfully made aware on this last visit how weak the flesh had grown of that utterly willing spirit, was firm with his mother. Get up—to see him off? He would like to see her try! There was Robert to see him off and old Mary, wasn't there? And Laura? Pack? Now did his mother think he should let her pack for him? There were boots, for instance, any one of which weighed more than his mother. Perhaps his mother would like to clean them for him first? No doubt!

He outlined his ideas.

They would spend a quiet morning together, and after lunch she was to be good and settle down to her nap. Of course he would run up before he left and say good-bye again—what did she think? But then she must promise him to go to sleep, really to go to sleep—no slippings out of bed at the sound of carriage wheels—no surreptitious waving from behind window curtains. What? Did she think he didn't know her little ways?

He sat with her, as he had promised, till she fell into a light drowse, and then slipped away cautiously to his own room.

Laura, sitting in the parlour below, her eyes on a book, her ears a-prick at every sound, gave a sigh of relief as she heard his tread and the thud of his baggage on the floor. He had gone to his packing . . . he would come soon now . . . a matter of moments . . . for he always packed as if he were

cocking hay. . . . Ah—she thought so . . . his door was opening . . . he was coming downstairs. . . . She could afford at last to ignore the clock—that stolid thief who had impoverished her, filching one by one twenty minutes of the hoarded sixty that were hers.

He paused in the hall long enough to give her a pang. He was not going out?—to the stables? Yet she was able to look up indifferently when he opened—at last—the parlour door, and came in.

“Finished?” She smiled at him pleasantly with an air of temporarily relinquishing her book, of being very ready to return to it though, if he did not want to talk. She had been well drilled.

However, he was communicative.

“There was hardly anything—I’m not taking much. Oh, by the way—I’ve left some boots—to be re-soled—in trees—you might tell Mother. At least——”

“Oh, I’ll see to it,” said Laura easily. “Heeled too?”

“I think so. Oh—and there are some things—in the wardrobe—want seeing to—want cleaning.” He elaborated his directions.

A pause ensued, the inane pause that so often preludes a leave-taking. He walked about the room. She read her book. The clock ticked between them, saying ‘your turn—your turn,’ and each waited for the other to speak.

Justin bethought himself first.

“I say—what about the trap? Has somebody told Robert?”

Laura nodded.

“I told him. Four o’clock. Time enough?”

“Heaps. You’re fast.” He tinkered with the hands: and so—having arrived at the hearth-rug and the second arm-chair—sat down.

She gave him a quick little glance of delight. He was making himself comfortable! . . . He had crossed his hands under his head: was leaning back: was looking at her. . . . That meant that he was ready to talk. . . . She leant back in her turn, her book closed over her hand.

“When’s the next leave, Justin?”

"Lord knows!" he laughed. "You ought to have more sense, Laura. That's the sort of insatiable thing Mother says."

Laura laughed too, a touch of vexed colour in her cheeks. She did not often trip.

But he continued, always unconscious—

"Isn't Mother delicious about this war?—this infamous conspiracy of a Europe that ought to know better against my peace and person? You know—I never knew before what claws Mother had. The bloodthirsty things she says! And means too—bless her! Oh, it's all very well to laugh, Laura! That's just what Mother complains of. People don't realize how serious things are. A bullet might hit me!" He chuckled over his joke.

Laura's laughter was an excellent imitation of the real thing.

He grew sober again.

"I say—I suppose influenza always does pull people down so? She doesn't look at all fit."

"It's not the influenza. It's the war. It's the strain—the sitting still——" she broke off.

"From her letters you'd say she was flourishing. I didn't realize——" He hesitated a moment. Then—"I say—you might send me a line sometimes—on your own——"

He did not see her nod. Expecting an answer, he glanced up enquiringly to catch a look on her face that set him thinking. When he spoke again his tone had altered—Mrs. Cloud had dropped out of sight.

"Will you? Don't forget. One likes getting letters out there."

She flushed a sudden scarlet.

"I will. Of course I will. I would have before—if I'd thought—if I'd dreamed you wanted—if you'd said——" She tangled herself into silence. But it was a silence that was not pause but preparation, preliminary, the recession of the sea between wave and wave. Here was her chance. . . . For this she had prayed. . . . He was giving her her chance! . . . She would take it. . . . She would not be cowardly, nor falsely ashamed. . . . She would take her chance. . .

"Justin—I did write. I tried to write to you. I tore it up. I thought you'd never listen. I wanted to explain—about that wicked thing I did. Justin—I wanted to say—I want to say——" She paused. Her face was burning. Her lips were dry. The shaping of words was difficult. She found herself looking to him for help.

He, too, had coloured; but his eyes were kind. He uttered incredible words—

"It's all right, Laura. Don't worry."

She could not comprehend. She stumbled on again.

"—to say I'm sorry. You'll never know how sorry I am. I'd no shadow of right to do it. I see that now."

She stopped abruptly, believing she saw in his quick movement—he had risen from his chair and was fidgeting with the toys on the mantel—his man's apprehension of a scene. She watched him, absurdly occupied in piling matches, spilliken fashion: watched and waited till she could wait no longer.

"Justin——" she petitioned.

He turned. He was smiling at her—shyly, significantly, half-laughing.

"Don't worry, Laura," he said again.

His meaning was obvious enough, yet she stared at him, too incredulous to feel relief or contentment or triumph—any of the emotions she had a right to feel.

"Do you mean—is it possible—you don't mind any more?"

"Not much," he confessed.

"You've got over it—that I smashed it—your eggs—the collection—the only thing you ever cared about?"

"Oh, look here—I'm not a fool," he protested. "I never made such a God Almighty out of them as that!"

"Oh, Justin, you did!" cried Laura.

It was tactless; but she was too relieved to be careful. And yet a little blank—a little sore. It was strange to feel the nightmare of two years proved dream-stuff, swept aside, nullified in a moment, with a laugh. . . . It had been real enough to her. . . . She had paid, she was still paying, it seemed, for what he had long ago forgotten. . . . Somehow—it didn't seem fair. . . .

Justin's voice recalled her thoughts, shifted them from herself to him. Her soreness passed as she listened to him, grown serious again. He was explaining himself to her, slowly, with naïve interest.

"I suppose I did go off the tracks a bit. A thing takes hold of you, somehow. Not the eggs—the collecting. Anything would have done as well as eggs. It just happened to be eggs. Of course—now—I admit it was absurd. But the whole business—it made one's days so full. It was ripping to feel so keen. And when you smashed them—there was a hole in the world. Nothing to fill it. I felt lost—soured—I hated you. But when the war began all that dwindled. The war—but we talked about it the other day. It's gone. Blown away. And now—I don't care any more. Not a ha'-penny cuss. Queer, isn't it? So you needn't worry. I never think of it. But what I do think sometimes—what I've never understood——" He stopped in front of her, staring down at her with puzzled eyes—"Laura, what on earth made you do it?"

She flushed.

"It wasn't temper. It wasn't cattishness."

"No. I knew that, you know, all the time—really."

She hesitated painfully—groping for the convincing word.

"It was—— Because—— Oh, Justin, you know what you said yourself, the other day—about the war altering people—altering you, even. Oh, can't you see? I wanted to do—for you—what the war has done. I wasn't big enough. I made an insane mess of it. But that's what I tried to do."

She stopped, her eyes on her hands that trembled in her lap.

"But why?" he said, "but why?"

She raised her eyes to his patiently, letting him see all he chose, before she dropped them again.

The silence that lengthened between them was heavy, but not hostile. It brooded, continued, till she imagined, she dared to believe, that he was remembering, understanding. filling in gaps.

He gave a great restless sigh at last, and moved away.

"We made a fine old muddle of it all," he said.

Laura had no words.

"Didn't we?" he appealed to her.

She gave him a rueful little smile.

"I suppose——" His thoughts sent him with long strides up and down and up and down the room—brought him to a standstill at last before Laura in her chair, thought-bound too, yet more at peace than he.

"I suppose——" he began again: and then—"Laura, what do you think?"

She laughed at him then, openly—a little fearless laugh of pure amusement. Here was a novel gambit! "*I think*," he would begin, deceptively deprecatory; but he had never before said, "*What do you think?*"

He ignored her laughter, absently, as a nothing, a drift of down, a puff of smoke from the wind-teased fire. He was more deeply engaged. She had set him pondering—wondering—and now, with an amazing, wise simplicity that honoured him and her, he showed her where she had led him, stated his difficulty.

"Do you think it's right to marry as people do abroad—arranged—you know, without falling in love?"

She was slow in answering. She had her hope to strangle—her hope, the child of her love. She had to bury it deep, to disown it utterly, as a crazed and shameful bastard. But she did answer at last, faithfully, as she would have had him answer her.

"It's the unforgivable sin," said Laura.

And he was not content. It was what he expected, what he wanted. It confirmed him, justified him, was his own definite belief. But it disappointed him. He had wanted opposition, that he might overcome it. Her certainty disconcerted him, caused him to feel curiously aggrieved. How could she be so sure? . . . One laid down hard and fast rules; but there would always be exceptional cases. . . . Was there, after all, no middle way? . . .

As if she had known his thoughts she began to speak her own, freely and easily, as they came to her. For she had gained something in the last minutes, and she knew it. Beggared she might be—but she was free—free at last to be herself with Justin—hoping nothing—fearing nothing.

"After all," she meditated, "you say 'falling in love.' But what do you mean? Where will you draw the line? What is love? Are there two people alive who mean precisely the same thing? And yet it is the same thing. Just as all the gods—are God. Manifested," she smiled over her long words—"in endless diversity. Lancelot and Guinevere—Darby and Joan. But it's all love."

He half listened, her words interlacing his thought like woof threading a web. What, after all, did he mean—did he want? . . . Yesterday's half-forgotten verses flickered upon his mind—

Flower o' the broom? Maybe. . . .

Flower o' the pine? Not that, at least! . . . But what *did* he want? . . . Romance, he supposed. . . . Yes, he asked of Life romance. . . . And she tossed him—Laura! . . . With such an air, too, of knowing what was good for him! . . . Other men adventured as they chose . . . over hell—under heaven . . . but Life had always grandmothered him, he thought, with a new resentful flash of insight.

Romance . . . the ideal woman . . . with mystery in her eyes. . . . Yet would he after all find a position of perpetual adoration comfortable? . . . Would Romance darn his trousers when they rubbed through at the knees? . . . He smiled. Laura would. . . . Yes—one came back to Laura . . . And if there were no mystery in Laura's eyes, whose was the fault? . . .

Laura—Laura—a singing name. . . . He wished he could make up his mind. . . . He wished she would say something to him. . . .

But Laura sat silent. Knowing him as she knew her Bible, she was generally aware of the trend of his thoughts, for his simplicity was always naïvely defeating his reserve. She felt, she knew, how easily because unconsciously, a word from her, a glance, a gesture even, might weigh down, at that moment, the balanced scales. And two years ago she would have had no scruples: would have snatched at happiness as a child snatches at a robin, curious, friendly, hopping closer and closer. But now she could sit quiet, light-breathing

letting it query and advance, and retreat and advance again, letting it flit from knee to hand, from hand to shoulder, to perch there singing its song to her, to stay with her or fly away again at its own will.

No—she would not appeal. . . . He must be free, as she had learned to be free. . . . In her garden she had flowers for him—thornless roses, fruits to satisfy a man's hunger and thirst. . . . But he must pluck them for himself. . . . She would proffer nothing. . . .

Yet she felt his intensity of unrest as if it were her own. In that hour a sixth sense was love-lent to her, so that she saw his mind, with its crowded, conflicting thoughts that ran hither and thither like ants, with stumblings and bewilderments, with futile crossings and re-crossings, yet always with a definite surge forward in one direction, in her direction. His turmoil affected her strangely: she found herself watching him placidly, with a sort of amused sympathy. She knew how indignantly he disliked not being sure about everything in the world. Poor Justin! It must be maddening to him not to be sure about himself. . . .

All this on the surface of her mind: underneath, her whole soul was crying out to him, "Justin!—Justin!" calling his name, passionately, with insistent iteration, as a bird calls to its delaying mate.

And he, as if he heard, turned to her—

"Laura——"

"Yes, Justin?"

After all, he *was* very fond of her. . . . She belonged in. . . . The war had swept away so much . . . only the bare verities survived—duty—sleep—home—and Laura. . . . Surely he meant Laura too, when he thought, out there, of coming home? Suppose he came home one day and found her gone? . . .

His keen annoyance at the notion was queerly familiar. He had utterly forgotten the incidents of their engagement-day, and that she had ever told him that she might leave Brackenhurst; but he was certainly aware of an old annoyance, and of something newer, stronger than annoyance—a chill, snaky pang that was very like fear.

Laura gone?

Flower o' the quince. . . . How the catches rang in his head!

*Flower o' the quince,
I let Lisa go, and what good in life since?*

Oh, if it came to that!

He must have spoken aloud, for she lifted her eyes. She was startled to see him coming to her across the room, hard-pressed, in desperate fashion, like a man who would shake off his own shadow. She half rose. She was suddenly frightened. She put out her hands, fending him off.

"Justin—Justin—be sure——"

She fell back in her chair because he was so near.

"Justin—wait. Be sure. Be very, very sure." Her lips trembled childishly. "You must be sure. If you found out, afterwards—— I couldn't stand it—twice."

It was so unlike her that he was shocked. He thought she must have suffered beyond belief to say such a thing to him. Sure? He would show her! . . . For an instant he was a man enlightened—forgetting all himself in an impulse of pure tenderness. He would show her! . . .

"Laura——"

'One! two! three! four!' The clock chimed in—sweet, icy, maliciously sedate. 'And your train, Justin? And your train?' Its echoes were lost in the crunch of the punctual wheels on the drive.

His hands dropped again, between impatience and relief.

Laura rose hastily. It was pitiful to watch Martha ousting Mary in her face. She was the old Laura, the wistful, anxious Laura again, full of words and plannings and solitudes.

"You must go. I had forgotten. I had forgotten the war. It isn't the time. You mustn't lose your train, Justin. Will you go quickly to your mother? Your bag—your mackintosh—I'll see to your things. I'm coming with you. I want to come with you. Your umbrella—— Of course! Soldiers don't have umbrellas."

She followed him into the hall, and while he ran upstairs, went out on to the steps where old Robert and the dog-cart awaited him. She spoke quickly.

"You can get down, Robert. I am driving Mr. Justin."

Robert, with a tall fighting son of his own, was tenacious of his crack with the young master. He expostulated respectfully. There had never been so fresh a mare as the mare between the shafts of the dog-cart.

But Miss Laura—courteous, thoughtful Miss Laura—cut inexorably through his suggestions.

"I'm driving Mr. Justin, Robert. He won't be a moment."

She took the reins from his unwilling hand and springing up, settled herself quickly in his rightful place. He might have been a chauffeur, a hired chauffeur, from her tone. He retired to the back seat, outraged.

They said nothing at all during their short drive. Laura's eyes, and for all Justin knew her thoughts, were on the mare's ears, a-prick for an excuse to shy. And his thoughts had travelled ahead of him. He was wondering where he should find his men, and how. . . . In a way he shouldn't be sorry to get back. . . . One never knew what might happen when one left the show to other people. . . . Yet how he hated leaving it all . . . his mother . . . and the quiet . . . and his own den . . . and Laura. . . . As for Laura—he was glad—he was sorry—that their talk had broken where it had. . . . But Laura was right. . . . It wasn't the time. . . . He had seen, as in a crystal, a blurred glimpse of what the future might hold for him—Fair Haven or Fata Morgana—but which he could not tell . . . he had not time to tell. . . .

Fair Haven . . . his home—his wife—his children, his own children—a slip of a daughter, maybe—a fierce, rain-drenched imp with eyes like diamonds—with eyes like Laura's. . . .

Fair Haven? Fata Morgana? How was he to know? Good Lord, how was he to know? . . .

And then, resentfully—— Why couldn't Laura—no, that wasn't fair—she wasn't that sort—but why couldn't Life leave him alone? He was doing his job—he was fighting. Why couldn't Life leave it at that? . . . Life, oblivious of wars and peaces, sitting like a spider in her great web, spinning entanglements. . . . But he would not be involved in

her cobwebbery of commingling lives. . . . Why shouldn't he be on his own? . . .

*Flower o' the peach,
Death for us all, and his own life for each!*

His own life for each . . . There—there was common sense at last, behind the fever and the glamour! . . . *His own life for each* . . .

And yet—one was lonely sometimes. . . .

Oh, well—he must think things out. . . . But not now. . . . Laura was right—it wasn't the time. He clung to the comfortable phrase. That was the best of Laura. . . . She was a reasonable woman . . . never worried you. . . . It was worth while to be at peace with Laura. . . .

How the week had flown! He wished he had had time to go to London again. . . . There was that play he had wanted to see. . . . It must wait for his next leave. . . . His next leave! He was as bad as Laura! And he had forgotten to order—but he had given Laura the list. . . . Laura would see to all that. . . . It would be a great relief to be able to write to Laura again . . . he hated worrying his mother. . . . And Laura didn't mind the bother. . . . It was comical—he really believed she enjoyed it. . . . Women were amazing creatures. . . .

They were none too soon at the station. Laura had barely time to settle him in a carriage with his ticket and his paper and his pipe, when a black and burly figure interposed between her and the carriage door—

“Stand back, please—stand back now, please!”

The train began to move.

Justin thrust out a friendly hand.

“Well—good-bye, Laura.”

“Good-bye, Justin.”

She kept pace for a moment with the gathering speed of the train.

“Justin—take care! You will take care? Don't bother about V.C.s and things.”

He laughed at that. She could do so little for him, but at least she could always make him laugh.

The train carried away Justin laughing.

She watched it dwindle to a toy and vanish in the tunnel, and still stood watching till the track wavered and danced, as she fought her blinding tears and petitioned the skies for Justin.

"Keep him safe, God. O God, keep him safe. Let him come back to me. O God, let him come back to me."

One voice of a thousand thousand, uplifted daily, hourly, in that cry—how shall it be preferred?

Yet I believe, I cannot help believing, that in the fulness of time he will come back to her.

Well, Collaborator—do you like it? You are sitting so silently in your big chair, and your knitting has dropped to the floor——

Collaborator, don't look so solemn! They're not real people! They're not real troubles! Only marionettes that we have set a-jig-jigging up and down our mantelpiece to make us laugh o' nights, and forget the unending war. And now we will send them jigging up and down printed pages, to do the same, if they can, for other poor folk.

Do you know how late it is, Collaborator? Rake out the fire, if you please, and come to bed.

What is the matter? You feel cheated? We have seen the completion of Laura, you say—but only the beginning of Justin? But that is the story! It was to be a comedy of growth—not a drama of maturity. First the blade, then the ear—I never promised you the full corn.

Still you are not satisfied? You protest that you are a practical person who calls a spade a spade, and you want to know, and you want to know, and you want to know——?

Why, then you must go on with the book by yourself, Collaborator, and in your own way. I'm at the end of my inventions. I'm tired. I want to go to bed. I know no more of Justin Cloud and Laura Valentine.

February 1916—October 1917.



KQ-779-648

